God's New Covenant

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This book would not have been written without all of you being in my life.

Thank you

Jeremiah 31:33-34 — "... This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

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Introduction

The night before Jesus died, He took communion with His twelve disciples. They gathered in an upper room, sat down, and ate. As they were eating, Jesus gave thanks for the bread, broke it, and gave it to them. Then He took the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.”

Many of us are familiar with those words, but we might not have understood the meaning of them. A covenant is the terms of an agreement between two parties. The New Covenant tells what God’s responsibilities are to us, and what ours are to God. When Jesus died the following day, He shed the blood of the New Covenant. The way God’s people relate to Him will now be through the New Covenant.

Fifteen centuries prior to this, Moses led the people of God out of Egypt. They may have been as many as three million people large. As they journeyed to the land of Israel, God gave them the Old Covenant, also known as the law. The law revealed what sin was. It contained the ten commandments and many other rules that would govern their society. The law was holy, righteous, and good.

Yet, as perfect as the law was, it ultimately failed to stop sin. The people of God struggled against sin throughout the many centuries that they were under the law. Sometimes God would raise up a righteous judge or a righteous king, and the people would do well for a few years. Yet there was no lasting victory. They knew what was right and wrong—the law told them this—but they were not able to obey what the law commanded. They committed idolatry, immorality, and other evils, and because of this, they were defeated and went into exile.

Humanity had a deeper need than to be given a perfect law and then be commanded to keep it. God knew that if His people were to truly follow Him, He would have to make a New Covenant, one that would truly transform them.

Four centuries after returning from the exile, God sent His Son, Jesus, into the world, and when He died on the cross, He placed us under the New Covenant. No longer would we try to attain holiness by keeping rules written on stone. The New Covenant offers to change us from within. How does the New Covenant work? What are its conditions? Does the New Covenant give us theology, or does it show us the way to overcome? I believe it does both.

The first five chapters of this book are chronological, starting with Creation and ending at the cross: God created a perfect Earth that had no sin whatsoever. But then Adam and Eve corrupted all of humanity when they disobeyed God in the garden of Eden. Mankind was given to a sinful nature ever since, and nothing they have tried has been able to change that. Whether God's people were being led by judges or ruled by kings, they always struggled with sin. Eventually God allowed His people to go into exile. But God also told His prophets that He would make a New Covenant in the future, and He described what that covenant would be. Jesus later came as the One who mediates and cuts (begins) the New Covenant.

Chapters six through nine go into detail about the provisions of the New Covenant: The everlasting love and grace of God are revealed in Christ but it is up to us to rest in them. The love that we receive from Christ helps us to love Him back, which is the greatest commandment. The New Covenant also provides a way for us to die to our flesh and to all the sins that go along with it. We also have the privilege of knowing Jesus and of Him living His life in us as we know Him more.

Chapter ten is my testimony. I went through a very dark period in my life. I suffered both physically and spiritually. I show how much of the truth in this book helped me to overcome. My testimony may help others also who are in a time of great suffering or who need to overcome in some way.

The New Covenant is the agreement we live under. It is God's way of transforming us and reconciling us back to Him. Jesus went to great lengths to place us under the New Covenant. Shouldn't we take time to learn what the New Covenant is and what God expects of us in it?

Chapter 1
The Fall of Mankind

In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth. In six days, God created light, plants, trees, animals, birds, sea creatures, the sun, moon, and stars, and last of all, Adam and Eve. At the end of creation, "God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good."

Earth was a perfect place. There was no suffering or sin of any kind. Man and animal lived in perfect peace with each other. There was no selfishness, hatred, pride, lying, stealing, or anything that went against love. They were good in body, soul, and spirit. It was in their *nature* for animals and humans to do good and only good. Mankind didn't know evil at this stage of history. There was no temptation to commit any of the sins just mentioned because everyone was good through and through. As long as mankind did not eat from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, there would be no thought, temptation, or desire to do something evil. We would not know what evil was, or that it even existed.

How did Adam and Eve become such thoroughly good people? Was it because they studied lots of books? Did they attend seminary? Did they attend church every week or go to Bible study? Did they have the ten commandments that they strove to obey? No. They didn't do any of these. There was no need for them. In fact, they didn't have to even try at all to be good. They were good because God created them good, and there was nothing in them that ever wanted to do evil.

God planted two trees in the garden of Eden: the Tree of Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. God gave Adam the command,

> Genesis 2:17 — "... Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die."

Sadly, Adam and Eve chose to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, and this world has been full of sin and suffering ever since.

God told Adam "in the day" that you eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, you will surely die. We know Adam and Eve didn't *physically* die that day, so they must have died some other way. It must have been their spirits that died. After Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, they became *spiritually* dead. Right after they ate the fruit,

> Genesis 3:7 — … The eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves coverings.

Do you see how they are now self-aware and defensive? They are now thinking and watching out for themselves. They didn't use to do that. But now, they can't help it. Their nature has changed. They were created with a good nature, but now they have a sinful nature.

God is entirely holy, and He cannot dwell with those who are sinful. Adam and Eve did not know that by eating the fruit, they would make themselves unworthy of being in the Presence of God. The serpent tempted Eve, saying, "You will not surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil." In a sense Adam and Eve did become like God, knowing good and evil (Gen 3:22), but the serpent lied when he said, "You will not surely die." Adam and Eve did die, spiritually. They are now unworthy to be in the Presence of God. God also didn't want them to eat from the tree of Life and live forever in their fallen state. So God drove them out of Eden.

Adam and Eve's sin didn't just affect them. It also affected all of the animals. Before the fall God had said,

> Genesis 1:30 — "Also, to every beast of the earth, to every bird of the air, and to everything that creeps on the earth, in which there is life, I have given every green herb for food"; and it was so.

The animals did not kill each other in the time before Adam and Eve ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The evil thought of killing another animal for food did not enter their mind. But after Adam and Eve ate from the tree, the animals also lost their good nature, and they began killing and eating each other.

It is impossible for mankind to put the world back to this perfect place where the animals have no desire to harm. But it is not impossible for God to put the world back to that place. One day, under the reign of Christ, the animals will return to the good state they were created in. Isaiah 11 describes this future time. Here is a portion of that.

> Isaiah 11:7-9 — The cow and the bear shall graze; Their young ones shall lie down together; And the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra's hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper's den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

It is such a beautiful picture of peace, and a far cry from the world as it is today. We would all count it a miracle if the animals stopped harming each other. Yes, animals can be *taught* to not harm each other. But it is still their *nature* to do so. Do we realize that humans are in the same situation as the animals? We are taught good behavior as we grow up during childhood, but there is still a nature in us that wants to do otherwise.

The plants were also affected by Adam's sin. They began growing thorns and thistles, making it painful to harvest food. Also, Adam and

Eve could no longer eat from the garden of Eden. They would have to become farmers, labor for their food with sweat, and eat what grows in the wild.

> Genesis 3:17-19 — Then to Adam He said, "Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you, saying, 'You shall not eat of it': "Cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field. In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground…"

The first two sons of Adam and Eve were Cain and Abel. Abel was a righteous man. Did God allow Abel to walk into the garden of Eden and eat from the Tree of Life? No. Even in his righteousness, Abel still had a sinful nature like all of us. He isn't worthy to be in the presence of the Most Holy God. Not a single descendent of Adam and Eve is sinless through and through. And so none of them have been allowed to eat from the Tree of Life. Interestingly, the Tree of Life is mentioned again, all the way in the last chapter of the Bible. It is in Heaven, the New Jerusalem. But by the time we get there we will have put off this body with its sinful nature. The blood of Jesus will have powerfully cleansed us from all sin, and we will be worthy to eat from it.

One day Cain and Abel both brought an offering to the Lord. The Lord accepted Abel's offering, but not Cain's. Cain was jealous that God only accepted Abel's offering. Sadly, Cain murdered Abel. Would this tragedy have happened if Adam and Eve never ate from the Tree of the knowledge of good and evil? No. Jealousy or murder would have never entered Cain's mind. Cain would have never been tempted by those. He would have never known evil thoughts, like jealousy and murder. Thankfully it's rare for someone to murder. But,

feelings of anger and jealousy have afflicted all of us, as they did Cain.

What I am trying to say is that *we are used to having a sinful nature*, and we don't consider that these feelings and many others come from the fallen nature that we inherit from Adam. It is difficult for us to grasp what it is like to never have an evil thought or desire. But this is how it was in Eden, and how it is in Heaven.

How Deep Our Sinful Nature Goes

We are so used to living in a sinful world that we often fail to see how deep rooted our sinful nature goes:

> Jeremiah 17:9 — "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; Who can know it?"
> Proverbs 20:9 — Who can say, "I have made my heart clean, I am pure from my sin"?
> Ecclesiastes 7:20 — For there is not a just man on earth who does good and does not sin.
>
> Romans 3:10-18 — As it is written:
> "There is none righteous, no, not one;
> There is none who understands;
> There is none who seeks after God.
> They have all turned aside;
> They have together become unprofitable;
> There is none who does good, no, not one."
> "Their throat is an open tomb;
> With their tongues they have practiced deceit";
> "The poison of asps is under their lips";
> "Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness."
> "Their feet are swift to shed blood;

Destruction and misery are in their ways;
And the way of peace they have not known."
"There is no fear of God before their eyes."

In the following verses, the word "you" is plural. Paul is telling the churches that before they came to Christ, they were all given over to sin.

> Colossians 1:21 — And you (all), who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works …
> Colossians 2:13 — And you (all), being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh …
> Titus 3:3 — For we ourselves were (all) also once foolish, disobedient, deceived, serving various lusts and pleasures, living in malice and envy, hateful and hating one another.
> Ephesians 2:1-3 — And you (all) He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you (all) once walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience, among whom also *we all* once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.

Throughout the book I say that humanity is spiritually "dead in trespasses and sins." Whenever I say that, it is a reference to the passage in Ephesians above.

The sinful nature that we inherit will desire to do the works listed next:

> Galatians 5:19-21 — Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you

> beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

There is nothing good in this list. The sinful nature is always selfish, and it can never be satisfied. We may be able to live clean on the outside, but we cannot be rid of selfish thoughts and desires on the inside.

> Proverbs 13:10 KJV — Only by pride cometh contention: but with the well advised is wisdom.

There is much strife and contention in this world. Many (maybe all) of us find those in our own lives. But those are just symptoms of a deeper problem of pride. That means that nearly all of us have at least some amount of pride. I am not trying to condemn anyone. All I am trying to do is to point out that something about the human condition isn't right.

> Proverbs 15:8 — The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD …
> Proverbs 21:4 — A haughty look, a proud heart, and the plowing of the wicked are sin.

The sacrifice and plowing of the wicked are sin? How can that be? God sees the heart. If a man does something, even a good thing, but has evil in his heart, his deed will not be accepted by God. It will be regarded as sin. The sad state of mankind after the fall is that we cannot bring our own righteousness to God. We may think we did great things. But we will not be able to say that our *inward* man was entirely right with God, that it was entirely loving Him, and that there was never a hint of sin inside us.

As a quick example of the sinful nature, have you ever shown favoritism to someone for their looks? You may think it is innocent to do that, but it's not. It is the opposite of how God works. God does not see the outside of a person. He sees the inside of a person.

> 1 Samuel 16:7 — … The LORD said to Samuel, " … For the LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

Or we can look at the reverse of this. Suppose there was someone with a bad case of leprosy nearby. With leprosy, people's limbs will rot away, smell terrible, and fall off. Would you avoid that person in disgust? If so, that is your sinful nature that feels that way. When a leper came to Jesus, He responded like this.

> Mark 1:40-42 — Now a leper came to Him, imploring Him, kneeling down to Him and saying to Him, "If You are willing, You can make me clean." Then Jesus, moved with compassion, stretched out His hand and touched him, and said to him, "I am willing; be cleansed." As soon as He had spoken, immediately the leprosy left him, and he was cleansed.

Jesus was moved with compassion for that man. There was no one who was too sinful or sick for Jesus to have compassion on.

We fail to see how corrupt our sinful nature is because we don't know what things are sin. Selfishness is sin. Failing to love God with all your heart is sin. Loving something in addition to God is sin. Coveting is sin. Pride is sin. Not giving God all the glory is sin. Not being thankful is sin. Not loving your neighbor is sin. Favoritism is sin. Unforgiveness is sin. Unbelief is sin. Laziness is sin. Sometimes fear, anger, ambition, and jealousy can be sin. There are so many other sins too. And the sobering truth is, if you commit even a moment of sin, you are declared guilty, and you incur the everlasting wrath of a Holy God.

If we could for a moment see everything in our hearts that is sin, we would quickly despair of ourselves. We would say, "I didn't realize all these things were sin. I am so used to them that I thought they were normal." And you would also say, "I never knew I was this corrupt.

There is no way I can rid all of this sin out of me. It has become very deep rooted, and it is far too much for me to stop it all. I have no hope at making myself holy enough for Almighty God to accept me." That is exactly the point. The Bible is trying to make you understand that all of humanity is in a great predicament. We have all sinned. But worse than that, on our own we are not even able to stop our sinning.

If we are going to rightly understand the Bible, it is important to understand the fallen nature that every one of us has through Adam. A lot of people are under the impression that they need Jesus because He died to pay for the sinful things they have done. And yes, Jesus did die to pay the penalty for our sinful deeds. But if you think that is all you need Jesus to do for you, then you don't understand how deeply corrupt the human condition is. We haven't just done wrong things. We are corrupt creatures to the very core of our soul. Our nature is to sin. And on top of that, we are powerless in ourselves to change that corruption. It's important to see how very dire our need for a Savior is. If we could clearly see everything in our hearts and thoughts that is sin, we would be shocked. We have no clue how desperately wicked we are, and how incredibly holy God is. And so we don't know the great plight that mankind finds itself in.

After spending the first three chapters in the book of Romans to show that the whole world lies guilty before God, Paul writes this.

> Romans 3:19 NIV — Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be *silenced* and the whole world held accountable to God.

And if I may say, herein is a major problem in modern Christianity. It isn't comfortable to expose how far short we fall of God's holiness. And so the church has not been brought to see the seriousness and the gravity of their sins. The moment has not hit us yet where we become *silenced* by seeing how very guilty we are before a Holy God. And if

we don't see this, we won't be filled with gratitude for the cross because we won't see the great amount of punishment we deserve, which Christ entirely took for us. And we also won't see how that "Christ in us" is our only hope to live righteously. This will be our focus later on. I am not saying that the church should feel condemned for having a sinful nature. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. What I am saying, though, is that we need Christ more than we realize.

You might not think you're a bad person. But you haven't seen God in His awesome holiness. Let us take an illustration from the Bible: We would all consider Isaiah the prophet a righteous man. He once had a vision of seeing God in His great Holiness. God's Mighty Presence made Isaiah so aware of his wretchedness that even this great prophet of God said,

> Isaiah 6:5 — … "Woe is me, for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, The LORD of hosts."

Another example is John the Baptist. Jesus said John the Baptist was the greatest prophet born of women. Yet even John the Baptist knew how wretched he was compared to the incredible holiness of the Messiah that was to come.

> Mark 1:7 — And he preached, saying, "There comes One after me who is mightier than I, whose sandal strap I am not worthy to stoop down and loose."

The holy apostle Paul also had an understanding of how sinful he was.

> 1 Timothy 1:15 — This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.

He doesn't say I *was* the chief of sinners, but I *am* the chief of sinners. How much more are we?

No Better than Anyone Else

You may hear on the news of criminals doing horrible, depraved, and evil things. You may think those criminals are worse people than law-abiding citizens. Maybe you think that they aren't worthy of love. But you have a fallen nature that is capable of committing the same evils that they do. Mankind tries to hide how evil they are. But we cannot fool God. He knows full-well the depravity of the human condition, but He loves us still. God still loves the criminals who have done unspeakable deeds. If He didn't, they would have no hope of salvation. God wants them to be saved too, which means He still loves them.

When you hear stories of people committing evil deeds, you are no better. Perhaps you have learned to behave and control yourself, but that same nature is in you too.

Romans 1:21-32 (which you may read on your own) describes the fallen, depraved state of the unrestrained human condition. For anyone who objects saying "I am better than those people," Paul writes,

> Romans 2:1 — Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.

Since we all have the same fallen nature, it is wrong to think you are better than another.

> Romans 3:9 — What then? Are we better than they? Not at all. For we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin.

Now that all of us have a nature that tends toward sin, will God be patient with us? Will He have mercy for our myriad faults? Yes.

> Psalm 103:10 — He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor punished us according to our iniquities.

Why would God be so kind? He answers that a few verses later,

> Psalm 103:14 — For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.

God understands that we have a corrupt nature through Adam. So He will treat us better than what we deserve.

There are many people out there who say, "I am too sinful for there to be any hope for me. I have done way too many horrific things in my life. God would never forgive me for how evil I am." I say, not only you, but *everyone* has a very corrupt sinful nature in them that is evil to the core. It is capable of evils too terrible to mention in this book. You may think you are worse than most people out there. But everyone out there is born spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. If anyone is not disciplined, they are capable of all the same evils that you have done. Do not think you are worse than another person, or that you have sinned too much for God to forgive.

Someone may ask, "If I am unable to stop being dead in trespasses and sins, why does God ask me to repent from them?" I say, you *can* change your mind about your sins. You *can* agree that it is wrong and you want to stop. You *can* in many cases choose to stop doing the outward behavior of the sin. And you *can* choose to start trying to quit the inward sin too. You cannot remove the sin of Adam out of you, but you can change your mind about it.

Repentance was commanded even in the Old testament, before people became born again in their spirit. Repentance was also preached by John the Baptist. Before Jesus came, God wanted to prepare His people for Him. John preached, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Jesus came to bring the Kingdom of Heaven into our hearts. He wants to do that, but not against our will. We need to turn from our sins first.

Someone may say, "I'm a good person, and I'm not a Christian."
Let me say a few things about that.

1. Sin is often spoken of in the Bible as a condition of the heart, not just a wrong action. Can you say that you have never coveted anyone's possessions, money, looks, talents, or anything that belongs to them? Have you loved your neighbor as yourself? Have you ever had inappropriate thoughts in your head? What about bitterness, anger, or unforgiveness? All of these things are sins according to the Bible, even if they are only inward. Jesus never did any of them, and Heaven will be a place where these things are never done. That will exclude all of us from getting in, unless we can find someone who will pay our debt and wash us clean.
2. To break one of them is to break them all.
   James 2:10-11 — For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all. For He who said, "Do not commit adultery," also said, "Do not murder." Now if you do not commit adultery, but you do murder, you have become a transgressor of the law.
   God is so infinitely holy that even one sin will merit eternal wrath. But He is also full of love, and in His love, He sent Jesus to bear all of our wrath on the cross. God gives us to the end of our lives to believe His Son Jesus and accept Him as our Lord.

God's Redemption Plan

Ever since Adam and Eve sinned, mankind has been trying to get back to paradise, back to God. It is a built-in desire. You may not *know* that is who you are searching for, but something in you is not content, and it won't be content until you are connected to your Maker.

> Acts 17:26 RSV — And he made from one every nation of men to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation.

And why did God do all of the work in the verse above? It must be very important because it is a very big matter that God made all the nations. We see the reason in the very next verse.

> Acts 17:27 RSV — That they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not far from each one of us.

God wants us to find *Him*. It doesn't say, "that they might be religious," but, "that they should seek God, and find Him." Jesus said,

> John 17:3 — "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

To find God and know Him is the true need of humanity. Whether we know it or not, all of us are really trying to find our way back to God. It's just that we settle so easily for something else. To find God and know God is the way to have true life in you. And the good news is, it is God's desire that we should find Him.

After Adam and Eve fell, mankind was in need of salvation. We need both to be forgiven of our sins and also to be rid of the sinful nature we now have. God foresaw this. He began to announce His plan that would meet both of these needs.

Genesis 3:15 — "And I will put enmity between you (Satan) and the woman, and between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise His heel."

Genesis 3:21 — Also for Adam and his wife the LORD God made tunics of skin, and clothed them.

As Christians we believe the Seed is referring to Jesus. Satan "bruised His heel" on the cross, and Jesus will "bruise Satan's head" at the final judgment. The tunics of skin also refer to Jesus. He became our clothing of righteousness and salvation, as shown here.

Isaiah 61:10 — I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
My soul shall be joyful in my God;
For He has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
He has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
As a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments,
And as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

Note how God did not give mankind any set of laws or any self-improvement programs to help us with our behavior. If mankind could be saved by keeping a set of laws, I am sure God would have given it to them right there in the garden. Laws and behavioral changes will not save anyone, but the Seed that God prophesied of *will* save and transform all who trust in Him.

Chapter 2
Mankind Tries to Live the Christian Life

The Bible gives a history of God's dealings with mankind after they fell through Adam's disobedience. This chapter will break down history into four "ages" where God deals with His people in different dispensations. The "ages" are: the age of conscience, the age of the law, the age of Judges, and the age of kings. We will see whether any of these had success at stopping our sinful nature.

The Age of Conscience

After Adam and Eve sinned, their spirits died, and it now became the nature of mankind to do evil. But, God still allowed mankind to have their conscience, which is the ability on the inside to discern good from evil.

> Romans 2:14-15 — For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do the things in the law, these, although not having the law, are a law to themselves, who show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and between themselves their thoughts accusing or else excusing them.

Their conscience was all that they had to live by for the next 1600 years, till the Flood of Noah came. They did not have the ten commandments or any other laws God gave to Moses. They did not have the Scriptures. Nor did they have the Holy Spirit within them. So their revelation of God was limited. There were *some* righteous

people in this time. But by the time it reached Noah's day, this age ended in failure.

> Genesis 6:5 KJV — And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

Only Noah's family was found righteous. God flooded and destroyed the world because it had become corrupt. They had only their conscience, but it was not enough to live righteously. Living by their conscience did not rid sin from their lives.

The Age of the Law

After the flood, life went on for a few centuries. And then God found Abraham, who pleased God because of his faith. Then Abraham became the father of Isaac, who became the father of Jacob, who became the father of twelve sons. Then a famine struck the land, and Jacob and his sons all moved to Egypt to find food. Then, over 400 years, they multiplied greatly, till they were perhaps 3 million people large. God led them out of Egypt by Moses, and they went into the wilderness. There, God gave them the law, which consisted of the ten commandments He spoke from Mount Sinai plus many other rules for society. It also contained the design of a Tabernacle they were to build.

The Tabernacle was a large tent that made a way for people to approach God. It was divided in three sections: the outer court (open to all Israelites), the Holy Place (open only to the Priests), and the Holy of Holies, where God dwells (open only to the High Priest). The people would offer their sacrifices in the outer court, the priests would carry out ministry duties in the Holy Place, and once a year the High Priest would bring the blood of a young bull into the Holy of Holies

to make atonement for the sins of all the Israelites committed in the past year.

The deepest part of The Tabernacle was the Holy of Holies. It was a room with only one object in it, the Ark of the Covenant. On top of the Ark was a cover called the mercy seat. Let us look at three details in the Tabernacle that relate to approaching God.

1. Two cherubims were placed on the mercy seat. They guarded the Presence of God, who dwelled between them.
2. The gate of the Tabernacle was placed on the East side.
3. There was a thick veil that guarded the entrance into the Holy of Holies. If anyone, apart from the High Priest, dares to enter this room where God is, they will die.

Now let us briefly look at three details about the garden of Eden after God drove Adam and Eve from there.

1. Cherubims guarded the way to God.
2. They were placed on the East side of the garden.
3. They had flaming swords that turned in every direction. If anyone dares to enter the garden of Eden where God is, they will die.

Do those three qualities of the garden of Eden sound similar to the Tabernacle? Yes. They are the same. Mankind was driven away from the Presence of God when they sinned in the garden of Eden. And now God has given them the Tabernacle to recreate the conditions of the garden of Eden so that man can find their way back to God.

But there is a large problem: No one is allowed to enter the Holy of Holies, where the Presence of God is. Only the High Priest can enter, and only once a year, and only if he brings blood. *You* aren't allowed in. If you are desperate to truly be with God, in His Presence, you will have to wait for something besides the Tabernacle. The Holy Spirit was showing the people that the true way to the Presence of God is

not going to happen at this time in history and through this Tabernacle.

> Hebrews 9:7-8 — But into the second part the High Priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people's sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing.

It is important to note that the law made a provision for how to be righteous. This provision is for you to keep all of the commandments in it.

> Deuteronomy 6:25 — "Then it will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the LORD our God, as He has commanded us."

And here it is again.

> Leviticus 18:5 — "You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them…"

In other words, if a man perfectly keeps the law, he will live forever in Heaven because he kept them. And the reverse of that is also true. If a man fails to keep all of the law, he will be cursed.

> Deuteronomy 27:26 — "Cursed is the one who does not confirm all the words of this law by observing them." …

What if you have sinned? Is there something you can do to remove the curse from you? The Tabernacle had a system of priests, animal sacrifices, and an altar for those sacrifices. If you have sinned, you would bring a lamb or goat, and the priest would kill it and burn it on the altar. The animal would symbolically take your curse for you so that you can be forgiven and don't have to remain cursed.

But there are some problems. Animals aren't human, and so they can't take the place of a human. Nor do they have the value of a human, that their substitution would be of equal value to a human.

Animals also haven't been tempted the same way we have been. They also didn't willingly offer up themselves as a sacrifice. The prophet Micah realizes that neither animal sacrifices nor anything else will be able to pay for our sins.

> Micah 6:6-7 — With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before the High God? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

Or as the New Testament says,

> Hebrews 10:4 — For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins.

All that God could do was to *pass over* their sins. God is a God of perfect justice. The sins of humanity do need to be punished, but animal sacrifices will never be sufficient to God to pay that punishment.

Before Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, there was no sin on the Earth. But after they ate it, we were all "made sinners" (Rom 5:19). No man has ever kept all of the law because no one is able to. So there isn't a man who the law will pronounce righteous. The animal sacrifices also will not help us be declared righteous because they do not remove the guilt of sin. Far from giving humanity a way back to God, the law condemns all of humanity, and it doesn't offer us any way to remove that condemnation. The law offers *nothing* we can do to defeat our sinful nature, nor to remove the condemnation our sins deserve.

When God gave them the ten commandments at Mount Sinai, it was a very frightful scene.

> Exodus 19:16-19 — … There were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were

> in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice.

The scene of Mount Sinai was so terrifying that "when the people saw it, they trembled and stood afar off" (Exod 20:18). The burning mountain put such a great fear of God in them that they asked Moses to speak to them instead of God, lest they die (Deut 5:25). They said to him,

> Deuteronomy 5:27 — "You go near and hear all that the LORD our God may say, and tell us all that the LORD our God says to you, and we will hear and do it."

They had a determination to follow God's law. They feared God. But, would such fear be enough to keep them from breaking the law they just heard from God with their own ears? Is the power of fear strong enough to make people keep the law? We will see shortly how long they lasted.

After God came down on Mount Sinai in Exodus 19, He spoke the ten commandments to all the people in Exodus 20. Then He gave more laws to Moses in the next three chapters. Then, in Exodus 24, there was a ceremony to ratify the law: The people sacrificed calves and goats to the Lord. Then Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the altar. Now look at what happens next.

> Exodus 24:7-8 — Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read in the hearing of the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." And Moses took the blood, sprinkled it on the people, and said, "This is

> the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you according to all these words."

The Israelites said, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." That's what they *thought* they would do. That's also what they said they would do when they were at Mount Sinai, telling Moses "We will hear and do it." They assumed they were able to keep God's commandments. But they weren't.

After the law was ratified, Moses spent 40 days on the mountain with God. But then the people fell into the sin of idolatry.

> Exodus 32:7-8 — And the LORD said to Moses, "Go, get down! For your people whom you brought out of the land of Egypt have corrupted themselves. They have turned aside *quickly* out of the way which I commanded them. They have made themselves a molded calf, and worshiped it and sacrificed to it, and said, 'This is your god, O Israel, that brought you out of the land of Egypt!'"

Their fear and willpower to keep the law made them last barely 40 days without an idol. And then they gave in to their fallen nature and made a golden calf. They had twice said to Moses that they will obey God's commands. They meant it. They thought they were able to obey His commands, but they weren't.

In the Old Covenant, the people (not God) take it on themselves to do and obey the commands of the law. A lot of people today, without even realizing it, assume that by their own willpower they are able to obey all of the law. For a time, willpower can give you the strength to make some changes in your life. But willpower does not remove the sinful nature from our dead spirits. The Israelites are still spiritually "dead in trespasses and sins." They haven't had the difficult revelation that they aren't able to keep all of God's holy law. Their willpower may suffice them for a time to keep the law. But if their *spirits* aren't made alive, they will inevitably go back to their old

behavior. In the case of the Israelites, they quickly reverted back to idolatry.

Note, It isn't that the idol was the first time in 40 days that the Israelites committed a sin. Sin itself is not a breaking of the covenant. I'm sure there was plenty of sin among the Israelites in those 40 days. But the idol marked a time when their heart turned away from God and "turned back to Egypt" with its idols and sinful pleasures.

> Acts 7:39-40 — "... And in their hearts they turned back to Egypt, saying to Aaron, 'Make us gods to go before us …'"

God is after a *heart* that will not turn aside from loving Him. God alone wants to be our God. We all have faults, but worshiping idols is more than a fault. It is a decision to stop loving God with all the heart and to give that love to something else.

Moses destroyed the golden calf, melted it, poured it in water, and made the Israelites drink it so that they could not make another idol with it. Then they wandered the wilderness for 40 years. But even during this time, they kept their idols.

> Amos 5:25-26 — "Did you offer Me sacrifices and offerings in the wilderness forty years, O house of Israel? You also carried Sikkuth your king and Chiun, your idols, the star of your gods, which you made for yourselves."

Eight of the ten commandments begin with "You shall not." The other two commandments (Honor your father and mother, and Remember the Sabbath) don't begin with "you," but it is still implied that "you" are the one to keep the commandment. So for all ten commandments, the do-er of the commandment is "you." The Israelites did not have the Holy Spirit at this time. It would be entirely up to them—and them alone—to keep the commandments. They would have to rely on themselves, dead in trespasses and sins as they were, to keep God's holy and perfect law.

I titled this chapter, "Mankind Tries to Live the Christian Life" because that is what is happening in this time in history when God's people lived under the law of Moses. They are trying to keep it, but it isn't going well. One day, God will write His law on our hearts, and our ability to keep it will be much better. But at this point in time, God's law was written on tablets of stone.

The age of being under the law had a bad beginning, but it continued for many more centuries. Throughout the rest of the Old Testament, from Exodus to Malachi, God's people were under the Old Covenant. It continued until Jesus died and put us under the New Covenant.

The Age of Judges

After the Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness, Moses and Aaron died. Then Joshua led the Israelites into the Promised land and began to drive out the nations that inhabited it. Then Joshua also died. The Israelites were supposed to continue conquering the Promised Land and drive out the nations and their idols, but they didn't. They disobeyed God by allowing the nations and their idols to dwell among them. So God sent an angel who said to them,

> Judges 2:3 — … "I will not drive them out before you; but they shall be thorns in your side, and their gods shall be a snare to you."

It is sad how disobeying God can lead to many more sins. And that is what happened here. By not destroying the nations that God told them to destroy, the idols of those nations became a snare to them and caused them to do even a lot more sin.

A pattern began to emerge where God's people would become defeated, and then God would raise up a judge to deliver His people from the enemy. It went like this:

God's people turn to idols, under the influence of the nations that they were supposed to drive out. Then God becomes jealous that His people are not serving Him. So He hands them over to the enemy nations where they suffer under enemy control. And then they cry out to God in their affliction, and God responds. He raises up a judge to deliver them out from the enemy. And for a time, God's people are no longer under the enemy and no longer serving idols. But sadly, they go right back to their sins after they are delivered.

Then the pattern repeats itself. God again hands them over to other nations as a punishment. Then, in their affliction, they need another judge to deliver them, and then another and another. The next verse passage shows the pattern that happened time and time again.

> Judges 2:17-19 — Yet they would not listen to their judges, but they played the harlot with other gods, and bowed down to them. They turned quickly from the way in which their fathers walked, in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do so. And when the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them out of the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed them and harassed them. And it came to pass, when the judge was dead, that they reverted and behaved more corruptly than their fathers, by following other gods, to serve them and bow down to them. They did not cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way.

Look at that last sentence. None of the judges was able to make them "cease from their own doings nor from their stubborn way." There were 12 judges that God raised up in the book of Judges, but the people would always go back to their own doings and to their stubborn way.

Three times in the book of Judges (which is a lot), we read the following verse (although 18:1 only has the first half).

> Judges 17:6, 18:1, 21:25 — In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.

I take that to mean that everyone had their own idea of what was right and wrong, and they tried to live according to that. But where did it get them to live this way? Did it help them to live by whatever seemed right in their own eyes? No. Their spirits had not been born again, and so their discernment between good and evil was wrong, and they continued in their sinful nature.

The people had the law with its ten commandments in this time. But they were definitely not keeping them. God had to raise up judges again and again to deliver His people from other nations. At this point in history there was no government or king to rule in Israel. The people did whatever they wanted. Why? Because "there was no king in Israel." Perhaps a king is the solution to their sin problem. God would eventually give them kings to rule over them, but only after 400 years of needing judges to deliver the people again and again. By the end of this long period of time it became clear that having judges did not stop their sinful nature.

The Age of Kings

The last judge was Samuel. Yet even in his day, after 400 years for Israel to learn not to go to idols, they were still doing it. (1 Sam 7:3-4). The people began to think that having a permanent king to fight for them would stop them from being defeated by their enemies. They said to Samuel,

> 1 Samuel 8:19-20 — … "No, but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles."

The people are making an error here, not realizing that it was the LORD who handed them to their enemies, it was the LORD who raised up judges, and it was the LORD who gave them victory. Samuel later told them,

> 1 Samuel 12:11-12 — "And *the LORD* sent Jerubbaal, Bedan, Jephthah, and Samuel, and delivered you out of the hand of your enemies on every side; and you dwelt in safety. And when you saw that Nahash king of the Ammonites came against you, you said to me, 'No, but a king shall reign over us,' when the LORD your God was your king."

God actually did *not* want them to have a king, even though without a king they kept going back to their sinful ways. God has been wanting the whole time for His people to make Him as their king in their hearts. When the people asked Samuel to make a king, God said to him,

> 1 Samuel 8:7 NASB20 — …"They have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being King over them.

If God truly occupied the place of "King" in their hearts, they would not give themselves to idolatry. But from the time they were delivered from Egypt, all the way to the days of Samuel, they have rejected God as being their king. Sometimes God gives us what we want, even though it won't help us, and that is what God does here. God granted their wish, and He gave Israel kings for the next 200 years.

Their first king was Saul. But he disobeyed God twice and became evil. So God removed Saul and made David the next king. David was a righteous king, and for this God chose David's descendants to be king after him. After David died, his son Solomon became king. Solomon started out righteous, but then he made idols under the pressure of his foreign wives. As punishment, God tore the kingdom of Israel away from Solomon's son Rehoboam. Now God's people were split into two nations. The northern eleven tribes became the

nation of Israel, and the southern-most tribe became the nation of Judah.

It's very sad, but if you read 1 Kings and 2 Kings, the nation of Israel was evil the whole time. All of their 19 kings (except maybe Jehu) were evil. So God destroyed Israel at the hands of Assyria.
2 Kings 17:5-23 summarizes what happened to the nation of Israel. It is too much to copy it all here. But here are a few verses from it:

> 2 Kings 17:11, 15, 18, 22-23 — There they burned incense on all the high places, like the nations whom the LORD had carried away before them; and they did wicked things to provoke the LORD to anger, ... And they rejected His statutes and His covenant that He had made with their fathers, and His testimonies which He had testified against them; they followed idols, became idolaters, and went after the nations who were all around them, concerning whom the LORD had charged them that they should not do like them. ... Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them from His sight; there was none left but the tribe of Judah alone. ... For the children of Israel walked in all the sins of Jeroboam which he did; they did not depart from them, until the LORD removed Israel out of His sight, as He had said by all His servants the prophets. So Israel was carried away from their own land to Assyria, as it is to this day.

The nation of Judah lasted about a century longer than Israel did. Of the kings of Judah, about half were righteous, and half were wicked. But eventually they also became very corrupt, and God saw that they too were fit for destruction. This time it was the nation of Babylon that God used to execute judgment on Judah.

So, neither Israel with its kings ever found a way to rid sin out of them, nor did Judah with its kings ever manage to rid sin out of them.

And so both nations were defeated. The age of the kings was a failure for both Israel and Judah.

No form of government was able to deal with the sin nature that all of us have. Whether it was Moses and the law in the wilderness, or the time of judges for 400 years, or living in a monarchy under a succession of Kings, *nothing* was able to make the people stop sinning. And today, some people think the solution is to have a certain form of government. And I believe some forms of government are better than others. But really, even the best form of government will do nothing to change the deep rooted nature we have to sin.

The people of Moses' day twice took an oath to keep the law. They said "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient." But they were not able to do it. Neither under Moses, nor under judges, nor under kings were they obedient to the law. So God allowed His two nations, Israel and Judah, to be defeated by Assyria and Babylon. But God did not make a permanent end of Judah as He did with Israel. He kept a remnant of people from Judah alive, and He sent them into Babylon where they would live in exile for 70 years.

Chapter 3
It Ends in Exile

Jeremiah was a prophet who lived in Judah at the time Babylon defeated them and took them as exiles. He spoke during the reign of six kings in Judah, rebuking the people and warning them of punishment if they did not turn from their sin, but they did not give heed. Shortly before God's people were captured, Jeremiah prophesied that Babylon would take them as captives for 70 years.

> Jeremiah 25:11-12 — "And this whole land shall be a desolation and an astonishment, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then it will come to pass, when seventy years are completed, that I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity," says the LORD; "and I will make it a perpetual desolation."

The exile of God's people is not something that should have surprised them, though. About 850 years before the exile, at the end of Moses' life, Moses went into great detail in Deuteronomy 28 about the blessings for obeying the LORD and the curses for forsaking the LORD. One of the curses is that they will go into exile.

> Deuteronomy 28:36 — "The LORD will bring you and the king whom you set over you to a nation which neither you nor your fathers have known, and there you shall serve other gods—wood and stone."
>
> Deuteronomy 28:49 — "The LORD will bring a nation against you from afar, from the end of the earth, as swift as the eagle flies, a nation whose language you will not understand."
>
> Deuteronomy 28:64 — "Then the LORD will scatter you among all peoples, from one end of the earth to the other, and

there you shall serve other gods, which neither you nor your fathers have known—wood and stone."

Shortly after describing the curses, God told Moses that those curses will indeed happen to the people. The Israelites will forsake the LORD and will be driven into other nations for it.

> Deuteronomy 30:1 — "Now it shall come to pass, when all these things come upon you, the blessing and the curse which I have set before you, and you call them to mind *among all the nations where the LORD your God drives you*,"

But God will also bring them back from their captivity.

> Deuteronomy 30:3 — "... The LORD your God will bring you back from captivity, and have compassion on you, and gather you again from all the nations where the LORD your God has scattered you."

God even gave Moses a song for the children of Israel. It would testify against them concerning their sins and idolatry that they are going to do, and it would also tell of the destruction God will bring because of it. God said this song would be remembered by future generations for them to remember when the destruction happens, which would be 850 years later. It is found in Deuteronomy 32:1-43. The song begins by declaring God's faithfulness, and that He rescued His people from the desert (Egypt). Then it prophesies that His people will forsake Him, worship idols, forget Him, and provoke Him to anger. Then in God's jealousy He will destroy them with hunger, pestilence, sword, and beasts. Just like Deuteronomy 28, God prophesies that disaster will come upon His people for their sins.

There were many curses of the law in Deuteronomy 28 that were happening in Jeremiah's day, besides the exile. Among them are:

- God will make the plague cling to them.
- God will bring them and their king to another nation where they will serve gods of wood and stone.

- God's people will become an astonishment, a proverb, and a byword among all nations where God drives them.
- They will be struck with the sword.
- The enemy will attack them at all their gates until their high and fortified walls come down throughout all their land.
- The siege of the enemy will be so severe that their food will be cut off and they will eat the flesh of their sons and daughters.

The people were clearly being destroyed and exiled for their sins because these curses of Deuteronomy 28 were happening. Jeremiah prophesied many of the same curses, and he also witnessed the fulfillment of them. He wrote Lamentations, in which he woefully laments the total devastation that has been brought upon his nation for their sins. It is a very sad book of the Bible.

One of the survivors who went into captivity was a righteous man named Daniel. Daniel realized that the curses that Moses wrote about 850 years earlier had happened. Daniel prayed to God for Israel, and he acknowledged their sin and the curse of Moses.

> Daniel 9:11 — "Yes, all Israel has transgressed Your law, and has departed so as not to obey Your voice; therefore the curse and the oath written in the Law of Moses the servant of God have been poured out on us, because we have sinned against Him."

Moses is by no means the only prophet to foretell that Israel will forsake God. Nearly all the Old Testament books bear witness that God's people will forsake the Lord, worship idols, commit many sins, and that God will send them into exile. But then these books also bear witness that God will have mercy on His people, restore their land to them, and God will send His Spirit upon them to cause them to keep His commands. God did restore their land to them after their 70 years

in exile, though it would be a few more centuries until He sent the Holy Spirit upon them.

Here are several Old Testament books that are based on the exile in some way:

The book of Habakkuk is mostly a prophecy that God is going to raise up Babylon to take His people into exile.

The books of Ezra and Nehemiah were written by two people who had been exiled in Babylon, but who returned from exile back to Judah to lead the people there.

The book of Esther was written while God's people were in exile. Mordecai and his adopted daughter, Esther, delivered the Jews that were in exile from being destroyed by the evil Haman.

The books of Haggai and Zechariah were written to encourage those who returned from exile to build the temple and to live for God.

The book of Daniel tells how God used the obedience of Daniel, an exile in Babylon. Daniel influenced Nebuchadnezzar and the next three kings for God.

In short, if there was no exile of the Israelites, then the following books would not even exist: Lamentations, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Daniel, Haggai, and Zechariah. These were all written, either when the people were in exile or when they were rebuilding their nation because it was destroyed during the exile. The exile was terrible, but it was also a major event in the Old Testament.

The Law Is Not the Problem

How is it possible that God's own people, under His holy law, became disobedient and went into exile? Was the problem with the law? Would maybe a different set of laws accomplish something better? No, there was nothing wrong with the law that God gave to them. Moses said to the people,

> Deuteronomy 4:8 — "And what great nation is there that has such statutes and righteous judgments as are in all this law which I set before you this day?"

The Apostle Paul says also,

> Romans 7:12 — Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good.

The law of Moses, the Old Covenant, was holy. It had the best statutes and judgments of any nation. It had the ten commandments. It also had the two great commandments: to love God with all your heart, and to love your neighbor as yourself. The law revealed sin, it gave rules for running family and society, and it had righteous punishments for breaking those rules.

But it did not work. The problem is not with the law of Moses. The problem, as I've said before, is that ever since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, their spirits died, and all of humanity died with them. We all became spiritually "dead in trespasses and sins." Human nature is so corrupt that even God's holy law, the best religious system in the world, resulted in failure. That is not a popular topic to discuss, but it is an important truth of the Bible. If you think you can improve yourself, you will not see your need to humbly depend on Christ moment by moment. We will see later that this is what we are to do.

Stephen the martyr picked up on the deep rooted sin problem that is displayed in the entire Old Testament. He says something deep here.

> Acts 7:51 — "You stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears! You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you."

Look at that last sentence: "As your fathers did, so do you." Humanity has not changed. It was our nature to resist the Holy Spirit ever since Adam and Eve sinned. And they were about to do it again by stoning Stephen to death shortly after saying this.

Later in Acts there was a council that discussed whether the church was supposed to keep circumcision and the rest of the law of Moses. Peter, who was strongly opposed to going back to the law, rose up and said,

> Acts 15:10 — "Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?"

That is what the law was—a yoke that their fathers were not able to bear.

They had the law for about 1500 years. That is how much time passed from Moses giving the law, to Jesus dying on the cross. That is a very long time. Yet even into Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, they were still committing sins that Malachi was rebuking. These were people that lived after the Israelites returned from their seventy years of exile. All that time of punishment did not cause them to keep the law. The people were still sinning. They knew the history of their nation, how God punishes sin. But even that did not change them. The 1500 years under the law did not work. As Hebrews 7:19 says, "for the law made nothing perfect …"

We can see from Israel's long history that this verse is correct—the law, holy and good as it was, made nothing perfect. You may be asking, "Why then did God give them the law if it made nothing perfect?" The Apostle Paul says,

> Romans 5:20 NIV — The law was brought in so that the trespass might increase…

That statement may sound very bold and incorrect. But look again at Israel's history in the Old Testament. Even though they had the most holy law of any nation, they continually reverted to idolatry, to immorality, to treating each other wrong, and to many other sins. Even the punishments God brought to them only helped them temporarily, and then they went back to their sin.

Paul also says,

> Romans 7:5 — For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death.

Look at that phrase: "The sinful passions which were aroused by the law." Apart from decreasing our sinful passions, the law aroused and increased them. Why would God want to give us the law if it caused our sins to increase? Does God somehow take pleasure in sin? No. God takes no pleasure in sin. The reason God was willing to let our sins abound was so that we would be brought to a humble awareness of our sinful nature.

> Galatians 3:19 AMP — Why, then, the Law [what was its purpose]? It was added [after the promise to Abraham, to reveal to people their guilt] because of transgressions [that is, to make people conscious of the sinfulness of sin] …

And also,

> Romans 3:19-20 — Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

It does not say, "By the law is the victory over sin." No. The law did not give us victory over sin. But it did make us aware of how deep-rooted our sinful nature is. We see how guilty we are before God, and so we stop our mouths. We stop thinking we are so high and

mighty. We become humble before God as we see how hopeless we are unless He does something to change us.

Along with Deuteronomy 28, Leviticus 26 also prophesies a captivity into the land of their enemies for their disobedience.

> Leviticus 26:40-41 — "But if they confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, with their unfaithfulness in which they were unfaithful to Me, and that they also have walked contrary to Me, and that I also have walked contrary to them and *have brought them into the land of their enemies*…"

Being "brought into the land of their enemies" is the same captivity that Deuteronomy 28 prophesied. What condition is God waiting for, until He brings them back to their land? The passage continues,

> Leviticus 26:41-42 — "... if their uncircumcised hearts are humbled, and they accept their guilt—then I will remember My covenant with Jacob, and My covenant with Isaac and My covenant with Abraham I will remember; I will remember the land."

So we see that in the exile God is wanting them to admit their sinfulness and to humble their hearts before Him. *Then* God will bring them back to their land.

You might think that victory over sin is more important than us coming to the end of ourselves and humbling ourselves before God, but you would be wrong. God can forgive large amounts of sin. He has no shortage of grace to forgive sin. His grace is far larger than any amount of sin we commit.

> Romans 5:20 NIV — … But where sin increased, grace increased all the more.

Even more important than preventing sin is that we humble ourselves, and that we come to see our need for a Savior. If we are proud and think we have it in ourselves to be good people, we won't humbly depend every moment upon our Savior.

Sometimes the best way to teach people a lesson is to let them fail as many times as they need to. It's true that we don't want them to fail. But even more important than that is that they finally learn whatever we are trying to teach them. It is worth all the failing that they go through if they finally learn the lesson in the end.

Paul had a struggle against sin in Romans 7. When the law came to him, he put himself under it, striving to keep it. But he found that his sin actually *increased* when he tried keeping the law. He said,

> Romans 7:9 — I was alive once without the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died.

I am sure God didn't want Paul to sin. But if that's what Paul has to go through for him to realize how badly he needs Jesus instead of the law, then God will let Paul struggle against sin as long as it takes. And it worked. By the end of the chapter, Paul humbled himself, he came to the end of himself, and he wrote,

> Romans 7:24-25 — O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!…

He didn't write that the law will deliver him from death. He wrote that Jesus will deliver him from death. God allowed Paul to learn the hard way that no law or self-improvement will remove sin from the heart. Only Jesus can remove sin.

Paul was a Pharisee. Outwardly speaking, the Pharisees did live a clean life. Jesus said to them, "You are like tombs that are beautiful on the outside." Religion and human effort are able to clean your outside. But inwardly, the Pharisees were maybe the most corrupt of all people. Jesus next said to the Pharisees, "Inwardly you are full of dead men's bones and all corruption." Paul wrote of himself as a Pharisee, "concerning the righteousness which is in the law, (I was) blameless." On the outside he wasn't doing much wrong. But on the inside he noticed that he was covetous. He knew he wasn't loving

God with all of his heart as long as he had these covetous desires in him.

Paul learned that in his humanity, he was never going to find a way to be rid of all sin. That brings us to the following verse, which I believe should become an important doctrine of every Christian.

> Romans 8:7 ASV — … The mind of the flesh is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can it be.

That verse is a summary of the Old Testament. Ever since Adam and Eve disobeyed God, our flesh became corrupt, unable to keep the law of God. God is fully aware that His people will not be able to keep His laws. But God's people themselves did not know that. They did not see how corrupt their human nature is. God gave them the law for 1500 years to show them that they cannot keep it. That is a very long time. God must have been trying to make a very large point. The law was given "that the transgression might increase", so that it would humble them, bring them to the end of themselves, and make them see their need for the Messiah.

In a verse similar to the one above, Jesus said,

> John 6:63 — "It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh profits nothing…"

They did not have the Holy Spirit during the 1500 years of the law. They had only their flesh to help them live a holy life. But it did not help them. Their efforts profited them nothing, as Jesus said.

The doctrine being presented here is not as well-known as it should be. It isn't comfortable to discuss the depraved nature of fallen humanity. But when people aren't aware of it, they will trust in their own strength to defeat sin. Try as they might, they will discover it won't work.

Often people are not able to discern what is and isn't sin. So they are not able to see how wretched their sinful heart is, and they never even try to fight against it. Other people know what their sins are, but they choose to make light of them and accept them as a normal part of life. Others will despair over their sins and will want to give up entirely. None of these responses is necessary. God does have a way to defeat the sinful nature, but you have to come to the end of yourself first. And that is difficult to do, especially in a world that teaches "You can do anything if you try hard enough." Yes, you can accomplish a lot by trying harder. But you cannot make your inner man keep God's holy law by trying harder.

I believe God could have decided to not give us the Old Covenant and only give us the New Covenant. But would we really see our need for the New Covenant if He had done this? No. If mankind thinks they have it within themselves to live a holy life, they won't see their need for a Savior to save them from their sins, which God offers us in the New Covenant. Now that humanity has tried to obey the law for 1500 years and failed, they might just come to the humble realization that they are not able to keep it after all. When presented with your flaws, it is natural to respond by saying, "I will fix it. I just need to try harder. I can change." But human nature doesn't work that way. We have a deeper problem than just needing to try harder. Our spirits are dead in trespasses and sins. God spent fifteen long centuries to show His people that they cannot defeat their sinful nature on their own. So we should let this be a big lesson for us also. God wants us to humbly come to the end of ourselves. That is difficult, but it is necessary if we are to walk in the new way He has promised us.

Chapter 4
God Promises a New Covenant

In addition to the exile being prophesied repeatedly, God's solution is also foretold on a repeated basis. It is written many times in the Old Testament that after His people return from exile, He will enact a New Covenant. This time He won't give us a set of laws written on stone tablets that we need to follow. He will do something far better. He will go right for the problem of sin itself by giving us a new heart. Our job will be to believe on His Son, and to know Him deeply.

We will examine several passages that describe the New Covenant. It is important to know what the New Covenant is because it shows God's way of transforming us. The ten commandments and the law of Moses were holy, but they had a large fault in that they did not remove sin. Therefore, God created a New Covenant that would not have the same fault as the Old. The book of Hebrews says,

> Hebrews 8:7 — For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.

The New Covenant in Jeremiah

Hebrews then goes on to quote Jeremiah 31:31-34, which is the most well-known passage about the New Covenant.

> Jeremiah 31:31-34 — "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them,

says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

Let's look at a few points about the New Covenant.

1. It is *not* like the covenant God made with Moses. The ten commandments were written on stones. They were rules for us to try to keep with our own efforts. The New Covenant, though, will be done by God working inside of us.
2. God will put His commands deep within us and write them on our heart. This happens by the Holy Spirit coming to live inside of us. As long as we yield to the Holy Spirit, we will no longer give in to the sinful nature.
3. God will be our God and we will (finally) be His people. If we take hold of it, God has made a way in the New Covenant where our hearts will no longer keep going to idols as they did in the Old Covenant. We will be able to love Him with all of our heart.
4. We can all now know the Lord in a very deep way. He says "They shall all know Me." I believe this refers to Jesus. He will pour out His love in our hearts, and we will love Him back. Instead of having to teach each other God's precepts, we will walk by knowing Jesus for ourselves.
5. The reason all these wonderful blessings are opening up to us is "for (meaning because) I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." Christ's death on the cross paid for the sins of the world once for all, making us worthy to know God.

That final point is very important. Five times the book of Hebrews says Jesus offered Himself "once" for our sins. In the Old Covenant, you had to sacrifice an animal after every time you sinned so that you would be forgiven. But now Christ has taken on Himself all our past, present, and future sins, and so He never has to be sacrificed again. We are "Forgiven once for all." That is what grace is. Grace is the unmerited favor God places on you. Grace is meant to motivate you to love and serve the One who so loves you that He keeps you in His covenant even when we sin.

The ten commandments were "You shall do this" and "You shall not do that." They all depend on *you*. Now look at the New Covenant. Three times God says what *He* will do. He says:

- I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts.
- I will be their God, and they shall be My people.
- I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.

The New Covenant will also be different from the law of Moses because it won't be the people living out a holy life by themselves. It will be God in them, causing them to live a holy life.

Jeremiah 32 has a section that also describes the New Covenant.

> Jeremiah 32:37-41 — "Behold, I will gather them out of all countries where I have driven them in My anger, in My fury, and in great wrath; I will bring them back to this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely. They shall be My people, and I will be their God; then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me. Yes, I will rejoice over them to do

them good, and I will assuredly plant them in this land, with all My heart and with all My soul."

Much of that is the same from the previous chapter, but with a few more details added. Several times it says God will do us good in the New Covenant. Also note, it will be an everlasting covenant. Sin will not break the covenant. Again, that is what grace is. They were not under grace in the law of Moses, but they are under grace in the New Covenant.

When God gave them the law on Mount Sinai, it was terrifying, and the people feared the Lord. God was well pleased with the fear they showed Him at that time. God said,

> Deuteronomy 5:29 — "Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever!"

Their human fear was good, but it did not last. In the New Covenant, though, *God* will place His fear in us.

> Jeremiah 32:40 — "And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me."

Jeremiah 33 also has a section that describes the New Covenant.

> Jeremiah 33:14-18 — 'Behold, the days are coming,' says the LORD, 'that I will perform that good thing which I have promised to the house of Israel and to the house of Judah: 'In those days and at that time I will cause to grow up to David a Branch of righteousness; He shall execute judgment and righteousness in the earth. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell safely. And this is the name by which she will be called: THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.' "For thus says the LORD: 'David shall

> never lack a man to sit on the throne of the house of Israel; 'nor shall the priests, the Levites, lack a man to offer burnt offerings before Me, to kindle grain offerings, and to sacrifice continually.'"

That passage is about Jesus, the son of David. Spiritually He will sit as King, on the throne of our hearts. And by His death on the cross He will become our righteousness because in Heaven He will offer up His own blood to God continually.

> Hebrews 7:24-25 — But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

The New Covenant in Daniel

The next passage about the New Covenant is in the book of Daniel. As we saw earlier, Daniel was among the exiles in Babylon. God gave him great wisdom and people knew God was with him. In addition to studying the law of Moses, he also studied the writings of Jeremiah the prophet. Therefore he was familiar with this prophecy of Jeremiah's:

> Jeremiah 29:10-14 — For thus says the LORD: After seventy years are completed at Babylon, I will visit you and perform My good word toward you, and cause you to return to this place. For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, says the LORD, thoughts of peace and not of evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart. I will be found by you, says the LORD, and I will bring you back from your captivity; I will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you, says

> the LORD, and I will bring you to the place from which I cause you to be carried away captive.

Daniel understood that he was living in the fulfillment of that. God didn't just say in that prophecy that He would bring the Israelites back from their captivity. There is a condition: "You will call upon Me and go and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. And you will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart." In obedience to this prophecy, Daniel began interceding for His nation that God would forgive it and restore it. His prayer is in Daniel 9:4-19. He pleads for God's mercy and confesses the sin of his nation and his own sin as well. In response to Daniel's prayer, the angel Gabriel is sent to him. What Gabriel says is profound.

> Daniel 9:24-26 — "Seventy weeks are determined
> For your people and for your holy city,
> To finish the transgression,
> To make an end of sins,
> To make reconciliation for iniquity,
> To bring in everlasting righteousness,
> To seal up vision and prophecy,
> And to anoint the Most Holy.
> Know therefore and understand, that from the going forth of the command to restore and build Jerusalem until Messiah the Prince, there shall be seven weeks and sixty-two weeks; the street shall be built again, and the wall, even in troublesome times. And after the sixty-two weeks Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself …"

Nearly all scholars agree that a "week" in that passage means seven years, and not seven days. Therefore, "seven weeks and sixty-two weeks" would be 49 years and 434 years. History tells us that after King Artaxerxes gave the command to rebuild Jerusalem, it was completed 49 years later. And 434 years after that, Jesus, the Messiah, was crucified (you do need to use a calendar of 360 days per year, but

the Bible sometimes uses that). The Messiah was cut off, but not for Himself. He had done nothing wrong. By the death of the Messiah, He made an end of transgression and sin, He made atonement (reconciliation) for them, and He brought in everlasting righteousness by sending the Holy Spirit into our hearts. These are the provisions of the New Covenant. And it is all the doing of the Lord, and not ourselves.

Do you remember the song God gave Moses in Deuteronomy 32 from the previous chapter? It is a very sad song, as it goes into detail of the destruction and captivity God's people will go through for forsaking Him. But the last verse of the song ends on a positive note.

> Deuteronomy 32:43 — "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with His people; For He will avenge the blood of His servants, and render vengeance to His adversaries; He will provide atonement for His land and His people."

God will make an ultimate atonement for His people.

The word "atonement" is kapar in Hebrew. It is the same word that the angel spoke to Daniel, "To make reconciliation (kapar) for iniquity." Gabriel is telling Daniel that the atonement that Moses spoke of is going to happen, and it will occur 483 years (49 years plus 434 years) after the command to rebuild Jerusalem. God was saying to the Israelites in Moses' day that He knows they will forsake Him and go into exile. But He will still love them through all of this, and He will make a sacrifice to atone for all of their sins. Here God is giving Daniel a timeline for when that will happen.

The New Covenant in Ezekiel

Another great passage about the New Covenant is Ezekiel 36:16-37:28. It is too long to copy the whole passage here. I divided it

into seven parts, giving some commentary on each part. I recommend reading the whole passage on your own.

Ezekiel, like Daniel, was living among the exiles from Judah. He wrote the book of Ezekiel to encourage the exiles to follow God. Much of the book is a rebuke to the people for the many sins they have been committing for the past several centuries. Yet, God did not give up on His people. About three quarters into the book, God shows Ezekiel what He will do to address the heart of His people that is bent on sin.

Ezekiel 36:16-24
God is giving a summary in these verses about His dealings with His people since the time centuries earlier when they began to occupy their land. He says they were not faithful to Him. They shed blood and committed idolatry. Therefore God removed them out of their land as exiles. But it was a disgrace to God's Name that His own people were captured. So God says that for His own Name's sake He will take His people from the nations where they were exiled, and He will bring them back into their own land again.

> Ezekiel 36:25-29 — "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God. I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses. I will call for the grain and multiply it, and bring no famine upon you."

Here God describes the steps that He will take to finally deal with the sinful nature that we have. He says:

- I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean.
- I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols.
- I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you.
- I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh.
- I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.
- I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses.

Just like the passages in Jeremiah and Daniel, God is saying in the Ezekiel passage that in the New Covenant, *God* will be the one taking the initiative. The Old Covenant tries to make you holy by commanding *you* what to do. I think many Christians try to achieve holiness the same way—by trying harder to live up to a set of expectations. But here we see in the New Covenant that it is *God* who will do the good works in you. *God* will place His virtues in you.

Also note another similarity with the Jeremiah 31 passage. The passage above says, "You shall be My people, and I will be your God." Jeremiah says, "I will be their God, and they shall be My people." These are the same statements. God is expressing His desire for us to be rid of our idols so that He alone will be our God, and we will be His people and be fully devoted to Him.

Ezekiel 36:30-38.
Here God talks about how He will bless the land of Israel after His people return there. God will multiply the trees and the fields, and the cities will be rebuilt. The land that was once desolate will be tilled, and it will become so beautiful that people will compare it to the garden of Eden. The nations around Israel will know that the Lord has restored His nation. The Israelites will also remember their evil deeds

that caused God to destroy the land, and they will loathe themselves for their sins.

Ezekiel 37:1-14

And now we come to a vision with a very deep meaning that God gave to Ezekiel of many dry bones coming to life by the Spirit. It is a powerful demonstration of what God will accomplish in the New Covenant. I believe this is one of the most important visions, frankly, in the whole Bible. So I have copied the whole vision here.

> Ezekiel 37:1-14 — The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it was full of bones. Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, there were very many in the open valley; and indeed they were very dry. And He said to me, "Son of man, can these bones live?" So I answered, "O Lord GOD, You know." Again He said to me, "Prophesy to these bones, and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD! Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: "Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that I am the LORD." ' " So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but there was no breath in them. Also He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, 'Thus says the Lord GOD: "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live." ' " So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army. Then He said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the

> whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’ Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that I am the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken it and performed it,” says the LORD.’ ”

Ezekiel sees himself in a valley that is full of dry bones. Those bones were dead. They had no life in them whatsoever. Ezekiel says, “indeed they were very dry.” God asks him “Can these bones live?” He says “O Lord God, You know.” God tells him, “Prophesy to these bones, ‘I will cause breath to enter into you, and you will live.’” Ezekiel prophesies as he was commanded. Then the bones became connected, and muscle and skin came on them, but they had no breath. God tells Ezekiel to prophesy to the wind to breathe upon them so they will live. Ezekiel obeys, and they stood on their feet, being now a great army. God tells Ezekiel that these bones are the whole house of Israel. Just as wind came into the bones and they lived, God says that He will place His Spirit in us, and we will live.

Verse 5 says,
Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: “Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live.” That may look familiar. It is similar wording to what happened when God made Adam:

> Genesis 2:7 — And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.

When God created Adam, He breathed into him, and he became a living being. Then Adam ate from the tree of the knowledge of good

and evil, and he spiritually died, and all of humanity with him. We have been "dead in trespasses and sins" (Eph 2:8) ever since. Unless God breathes life in us again, we have no life in our spirits. I believe this vision to Ezekiel is God saying He will breathe life into humanity a second time, and our spirits will live. What Adam destroyed with his transgression, God is going to reverse when He breathes His breath into us.

Those dead bones that Ezekiel saw are the dead nature of our spirits. We may have charisma, we may be friendly, and we may have good qualities, but we all still have sin, which if allowed to follow its course, will bring forth death (Jas 1:15). The sinful nature that all people inherit from Adam is a fundamental truth of the Bible, but it is not something spoken about very much today. It is an important doctrine because you won't come to the end of yourself and throw yourself completely on the saving power of Jesus if you don't really think you need it. You will just keep trusting that your own efforts can make yourself better. You won't know the power of His grace if you keep looking inward for strength.

Romans 3:9-18 describes the wretchedness of the sinful nature, which all of humanity has. Humanity doesn't need a self-improvement program. We need something far deeper than rules and effort. We need the living God to make us alive, wash the sin out of us, and plant righteousness inside us. If you saw a valley of dry bones, would we tell the bones to behave themselves, clean themselves up, and try harder? No. The only way those bones can live is if an outside Source breathes life into them. Spiritually, we have all been dead since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. The only hope of having spiritual life, and the only hope of living the Christian life, is if God breathes the Spirit of Life in us. That is what Ezekiel saw happening in his vision.

Someone may object here and say, “This vision is only about the nation of Israel, and it’s only about them going back to their land.” To that I say three things.

1. The Jeremiah 31 passage says that God will make a New Covenant “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” But we all understand that to mean not only the nations of Israel and Judah, but all believers everywhere, even if they aren’t from Israel or Judah. The same applies here. It isn’t just for Israel, but for all believers, including those outside of Israel.
2. Even if it was meant to be physical land, the metaphor still holds true that the entire human race is dead in trespasses and sins, just as dead as those bones Ezekiel saw in the vision.
   Ephesians 2:1 CSB — And you were dead in your trespasses and sins.
   And just as those bones were made physically alive by God, so also are we spiritually made alive by God.
   Ephesians 2:4-6 — But God, …even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus.
3. The Old Testament was a shadow of the real thing happening in the New Testament. There are many, many examples of events in the Old Testament that were a symbol of something in the New Testament. Here are a few: When the Israelites left Egypt, they passed through the Red Sea, which symbolized baptism (1 Cor 10:2). God told Abraham to sacrifice his only begotten son on a mountain. On the third day, Abraham received Isaac back again. That symbolizes that one day God will sacrifice His only begotten Son and will raise Him up the third day (Heb 11:17-19). Joseph was the favorite of his father, betrayed by his brothers, assumed to be dead, was exalted to the right hand of Pharaoh, and saved

his brothers who betrayed him. That is all a symbol of Jesus, who was loved by His Father, betrayed by the Jews, was dead for three days, was raised up and exalted to the right hand of God, and whose death saved all the Jews who would trust Him. And there are many other symbols in the Old Testament. So the vision of the exiles coming back into their land when God blows His wind on them is also a symbol of a reality in the New Testament. The reality is that God will make our spirits enter the land of "Heavenly places" when God breathes the Holy Spirit into us.

Ezekiel 37:15-22.
God says here that He will restore His people from the land of their exile. For about 200 years God's people were separated into two nations, Israel and Judah. Israel was defeated by the Assyrians with some taken as captives, and then Judah was defeated by the Babylonians, also with some taken as captives. God tells Ezekiel here that He will gather His people from everywhere they were taken, and bring them back to their own land. But this time when they come back, they will not be two nations anymore, but one nation.

> Ezekiel 37:23-25 — "They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God. David My servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd; they shall also walk in My judgments and observe My statutes, and do them. Then they shall dwell in the land that I have given to Jacob My servant, where your fathers dwelt; and they shall dwell there, they, their children, and their children's children, forever; and My servant David shall be their prince forever."

This is very similar to Ezekiel 36:25-29 which we looked at above. Again, God is saying that when the captives return from their exile, *He* will be the one that causes the people to walk in His judgments and statutes. *He* will cleanse them from their sin and from their idols. *He* will set up "David" to be their king and shepherd. "David" is understood to be the Son of David, who is Jesus. God promised King David (1 Chr 17:11-12) that he would have a seed after him whose kingdom He would establish forever. Here we see the fulfillment in verse 29: "My servant David shall be their prince forever." No human being can be king forever because death will stop them. But here it says that Jesus will be their king forever. Just as with the vision of dry bones being spiritual, the kingdom of Jesus will also be spiritual, in the heart, and not of this world.

> Ezekiel 37:26-28 — "Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people. The nations also will know that I, the LORD, sanctify Israel, when My sanctuary is in their midst forevermore."

God says here that He will make an everlasting covenant of peace with us. Again, that is what grace is. Under the law of Moses, you lose your peace with God by committing just one sin. But in the New Covenant, you are kept in peace with God even if you sin.

It isn't that sin no longer has the punishment of condemnation. Sin still has the righteous judgement of death. It's that under the New Covenant, you have a Great High Priest in Heaven who always lives to make intercession for you. He is continually offering to God the blood He shed when He died as a sacrifice. He bore all the death and

condemnation that your sins deserve, and now Jesus lives to offer the payment of them to the Father.

The New Covenant in Isaiah

The prophet Isaiah lived over a hundred years before Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The book that bears his name is sometimes called the Fifth Gospel. It has more to say about a coming Savior than any other book in the Old Testament. The Savior is referred to by different names in Isaiah. Among them are: Redeemer, Servant, Branch, and Immanuel. The Savior is connected with God's plan to redeem Israel. We won't be able to look at all the passages about Him, but we will look at a few of them. Here is our first.

> Isaiah 9:6-7 — For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this.

Many of Isaiah's prophecies are to be understood spiritually, and that is the case here. He prophesies there will be a Child who will reign on the throne of David, and His reign will be forever. Jesus did not reign forever when He came to Earth, but He does reign forever as king in Heaven and in the "government" of our hearts. "Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end." Jesus didn't come to control just part of our lives, but *all* of our lives. His reign must increase until He is King over every part of us.

Our second passage is from Isaiah 49.

> Isaiah 49:5-6, 8-9 — "And now the LORD says, who formed Me from the womb to be His Servant, to bring Jacob back to Him, so that Israel is gathered to Him (for I shall be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and My God shall be My strength), indeed He says, 'It is too small a thing that You should be My Servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give You as a light to the Gentiles, that You should be My salvation to the ends of the earth.'" ... Thus says the LORD: "In an acceptable time I have heard You, and in the day of salvation I have helped You; I will preserve You and give You as a covenant to the people, to restore the earth, to cause them to inherit the desolate heritages; That You may say to the prisoners, 'Go forth,' to those who are in darkness, 'Show yourselves.'"...

There is a lot to unpack in this passage. God formed His Servant in the womb to bring Israel back to Him, but then God makes Him a light also to the Gentiles. This will make Him "the Light of the world." The Servant will be God's salvation to the ends of the Earth. The relationship between God and His Servant will be close. God says to Him, "I have heard you. I have helped you. I will preserve You. I give *You* as a covenant to the people." The Servant says, "My God will be My Strength."

The Servant will also "cause them to inherit desolate heritages." I take the desolate heritages to refer to our heritage of eternal life with God. We will inherit this through the Servant. He will also say to the prisoners "Go forth." I believe this is a release from the prison of sin. Jesus said, "Whoever commits sin is a slave of sin." Jesus will make us free from that prison. The Servant will say to those in darkness "Show yourselves." He may mean, "Come out of darkness by coming to the Light." Jesus is "the true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world" (John 1:9).

Our third passage is from Isaiah 59. This chapter gives a brief summary of fallen man and God's plan to save us. Verses 1-8 show how sinful and depraved the fallen human nature is. Verses 9-15 show how utterly hopeless and in darkness we are on our own. But then verses 16-21 show God's redemption plan for us.

> Isaiah 59:16, 20-21 — (The LORD) saw that there was no man, and wondered that there was no intercessor; Therefore His own arm brought salvation for Him; And His own righteousness, it sustained Him. ... "The Redeemer will come to Zion, and to those who turn from transgression in Jacob," says the LORD. "As for Me," says the LORD, "this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants' descendants," says the LORD, "from this time and forevermore."

"His own arm brought salvation for Him." Under the law, we saved ourselves by keeping its commandments. But in the New Covenant, God is the One who will accomplish our salvation. The Covenant God will make with us is this: The Spirit who resides on the Redeemer will also reside upon us. Also, the words that God gives the Redeemer, He will also give to us. After Jesus rose, He sent the Holy Spirit upon us. And the Spirit gives us the words of Christ because the Spirit "will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears (from Me) He will speak" (John 16:13). The New Covenant will not be rules written on stone. Jesus will send the Holy Spirit upon us, and the Spirit will lead us into knowing Jesus and obeying His commands.

We could look at many other chapters in Isaiah that prophesy about a future Savior. Isaiah 11 is about the future reign of Jesus on the Earth that will be fulfilled at the end of the world. Isaiah 53 gives details about the cross that Jesus accurately fulfilled. Isaiah 54 describes the covenant of peace we will have with God. Isaiah 60 tells of God's blessing on His people and how the world will be drawn to them.

Isaiah 61 tells of the wonderful deeds that Christ will do when the Spirit of the Lord is upon Him. Isaiah 62 tells more about the blessing and favor of God on His people. Isaiah 63 begins with God's judgment, but then talks about His mercies. There is some love language in chapters 60-63, like the verse below. God will bestow His abundant favor upon us, and we will worship Him in return.

> Isaiah 63:7 — I will mention the lovingkindnesses of the LORD and the praises of the LORD, according to all that the LORD has bestowed on us, and the great goodness toward the house of Israel, which He has bestowed on them according to His mercies, according to the multitude of His lovingkindnesses.

In all of the passages above about the New Covenant, I want you to see that it is all God's doing. To Jeremiah, God says that *He* will write His law on our heart. To Daniel, God says *He* will make an end of our sins and bring in everlasting righteousness. To Ezekiel, God says that *He* will send the Holy Spirit to make the dead bones alive. To Isaiah, God says that *He* will send a Redeemer who will bring salvation to Israel and also to the whole world. God knows the corruption of our sinful nature, but He loves us. He knows that if anything good is to be found in our spirits, *He* is the one who will have to make it happen. This is what God says He will do in the New Covenant.

> Psalm 25:14 — The secret of the LORD is with those who fear Him, And He will show them His covenant.

Is this verse saying that to those who fear the Lord, He will reward them by giving them understanding of His covenant? I believe that is exactly what this verse says. Understanding the New Covenant must be pretty important then, and it is what we are trying to do in this book.

Chapter 5
Christ Cuts the New Covenant

After God's people returned from exile, they continued on for some 400 years, according to the time the angel Gabriel told Daniel they would have to wait until the Messiah came. Then, when the appointed time had arrived, God sent the angel Gabriel again, this time to a young girl named Mary, who was engaged to a man named Joseph. Gabriel said to Mary,

> Luke 1:31-33 — "And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

Gabriel's word aligns exactly with what God told Isaiah 700 years earlier.

> Isaiah 9:6-7 — For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given … Of the increase of His government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom … from that time forward, even forever…

The time had now come for the Messiah to come to Israel, One who would establish a New Covenant between them and God. This covenant will be one that they can keep by God's Spirit in them.

We don't read much of what happened in Jesus' first 30 years. But when He was about 30 years old, it became time for His ministry to begin. Jesus went to John the Baptist to be baptized by John. We read in Romans 6 that baptism is a symbol of dying to the flesh and being made alive by the Holy Spirit. After Jesus came out of the water,

> John 1:32 — … John bore witness, saying, "I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him."

Jesus is a type of King David in the Bible, and something similar happened when David was about to start "his ministry" in Israel.

> 1 Samuel 16:13 — Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward. So Samuel arose and went to Ramah.

We don't see many times in the Scripture where the Holy Spirit is pointed out as the One who was prompting, filling, enabling, and commanding Jesus and David to do what they did. Often we see Jesus do a miracle or David win a battle, and we attribute the victory to Jesus or David. But, Jesus and David always had the Holy Spirit upon them, and they both were only used of God *after* the Spirit came upon them (at Jesus' baptism and at David's anointing). You can be assured that almost all they did was through the Holy Spirit. It wasn't them alone doing great acts. The Holy Spirit was inside them, changing their inner being to glorify and obey God, and the Holy Spirit would also communicate God's will in certain situations. What Jesus had after the Holy Spirit came upon Him is what believers can walk in under the New Covenant.

> Isaiah 59:21 — "As for Me," says the LORD, "this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants…"

After Jesus was baptized, He spent 40 days in the wilderness. Here Jesus was tempted by the devil and overcame all the devil's temptations. The Israelites spent 40 years in the wilderness before they also began to conquer the Promised Land. For both Jesus and the Israelites, it was a time of dying to the flesh and learning to live a life

entirely dependent on God. Jesus never had any sin. Yet even He learned obedience by what He suffered.

> Hebrews 5:8-9 — though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him.

After Jesus suffered and had victory over every temptation, He left the wilderness.

> Luke 4:14 — Then Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit to Galilee, and news of Him went out through all the surrounding region.

Notice how it says Jesus was "in the power of the Spirit." Jesus never turned to the flesh when He was in the wilderness. He learned obedience to the Holy Spirit, even to the point of suffering, and now He would live the rest of His life "in the power of the Spirit."

Jesus Mediates the New Covenant

After preaching around Galilee for a time, his fame went abroad and great crowds began to follow Him. Now Jesus did not come to be a teacher of the Old Covenant, but of the New Covenant. It was now time for Jesus to "mediate" the New Covenant to the people. 1500 years earlier, it was Moses who "mediated" the Old Covenant. To "mediate" is to stand between two groups and be the one through whom the groups communicate with each other. This is what Moses did for the people on Mount Sinai:

> Deuteronomy 5:5 — "I stood between the LORD and you at that time, to declare to you the word of the LORD; for you were afraid because of the fire, and you did not go up the mountain…"

The mountain upon which God descended was on fire and a thick cloud covered it that produced lightning and thunder. God had also

commanded, “Whoever touches this mountain shall surely be put to death.” The people understandably dared not climb the mountain. Yet they still wanted to hear what God was saying. Therefore, they asked Moses to be their mediator, to stand between them and the LORD so that they can hear God by hearing what He told Moses.

Jesus, who is God in the flesh, also went upon a mountain and spoke to the people, as God did on Mount Sinai. But things were very different this time.

> Matthew 5:1 — And seeing the multitudes, He went up on a mountain, and when He was seated His disciples came to Him.

This time, the people *did* come to Him. They did climb the mountain to be near God as He spoke. There was no thunder and lightning. Nor was there fire and a thick cloud. It was the opposite. They sensed love, not fear. Multitudes came to hear and be close to Jesus.

And from the mountain Jesus uttered nine beatitudes in the gospel of Matthew. In Luke 6:21 we read a tenth beatitude that Matthew doesn’t record, making the total number of beatitudes to be ten. I think the comparison to the ten commandments is clear. When God “introduced Himself” after the people left Egypt, He descended on the mountain, and spoke ten commandments. When Jesus “introduced Himself” at the beginning of His ministry, He went on top of a mountain and spoke ten beatitudes. But the people did not ask for a mediator this time. Jesus spoke God’s word to the people, as Moses did. Moses had to be physically present on Mount Sinai to hear the words of God for the people. But Jesus had something different from Moses. Jesus said the Father lived *in Him*, and it was the Father who gave Him every word to say. Moses did not have that.

> John 14:10 — “Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works.”

The ten beatitudes have a different focus than the ten commandments. The ten commandments are mostly external. They are concerned with the outward action. The beatitudes, though, are spiritual. The very word "beatitudes" comes from the words "be" and "attitudes". They concern attitudes of the heart, the inner man. Jesus preached about being holy *inwardly*.

Here are the ten beatitudes, including the one from Luke.

> Matthew 5:3-10, Luke 6:21 —
> "Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
> Blessed are those who mourn, For they shall be comforted.
> Blessed are the meek, For they shall inherit the earth.
> Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, For they shall be filled.
> Blessed are you who weep now, For you shall laugh.
> Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy.
> Blessed are the pure in heart, For they shall see God.
> Blessed are the peacemakers, For they shall be called sons of God.
> Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
> Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake."

Notice how much the beatitudes emphasize love and humility. These are inward characteristics. The law is concerned with external actions, but that often leaves people with pride. Even if a person succeeds in cleaning themself up, they will be left with a temptation to think highly of themselves. God alone wants to be exalted, but that can't be if a person has pride. The beatitudes show how important humility is to God. It is the promise of a new heart that God said He would

accomplish in the New Covenant, and Jesus is showing us in the beatitudes what a new heart looks like.

After God gave the ten commandments on Mount Sinai, He went on to give many more commandments to the people through Moses. After Jesus spoke the ten beatitudes, He also went on to give many more commandments to the people, in Matthew chapters 5-7. But again, there is a big difference between the commandments of Moses and the commandments of Jesus. The commandments of Moses of were mostly external, concerned with the outward action, whereas the commandments of Jesus were spiritual, of the heart. For example:

> Matthew 5:27-28 — "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not commit adultery.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

There is the outward action of adultery, which the ten commandments call a sin. But Jesus is now telling us that to even look at a woman with lust means you have committed adultery spiritually, in your heart.

Here is a summary of Matthew 5-7, besides the beatitudes:
"Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven. Do not be angry with your brother. Be reconciled to those who have something against you. Do not lust after anyone. Do not swear. But let your 'Yes' be 'Yes,' and your 'No,' 'No.' Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you. Do not pray, fast, or do your good deeds to be seen by people. Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, but in Heaven. You cannot serve God and mammon. Do not worry about your life or your needs because your Father in Heaven knows what you need. Do not judge so that you will not be judged. Keep asking, seeking, and knocking, for your Father in Heaven gives good things to those who ask Him. Whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them. Enter by the narrow gate. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we

not done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!' Whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock."

The commandments above are mostly regarding the inner man. When the people left Egypt under Moses, God gave them the ten commandments, followed by many other commandments. These commandments were the law of the land. Every nation has a set of laws that govern it. The Kingdom of Israel was governed by the ten commandments plus all the other commandments in the law.

But now Jesus has declared His own ten commandments (beatitudes), followed by many other commandments. Jesus is establishing a new kingdom. The Kingdom of Israel was an actual place in the world. But the kingdom Jesus is creating exists *within you*. Look at what Jesus said about the Kingdom of God.

> Luke 17:20-21 — … "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'See here!' or 'See there!' For indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."

When Jesus was delivered to be crucified, He said,

> John 18:36 — … "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here."

It is from within that Jesus wants to be your King and Lord. The nation of Israel was a physical kingdom. It was a dominating force. It was a threat to its enemies. The temple and other structures in it were a real sight to behold. But the kingdom that Jesus is building is not physical. It will be within you. People can't see it with their eyes. It's not glorious. No one will be amazed at it. But this is where Jesus wants to rule. And when He rules there, it won't be marked by proud, brute strength. It will be marked by love and humility.

I for one am grateful that Jesus has been so loving and humble with me for the times that I have failed Him. That is the kind of Savior I need. If King Jesus were to exert the wrath of an earthly king, none of us would be here right now. We have no idea how incredibly patient Jesus is toward us. Jesus is the King of love and humility. That is how He treats us for our faults, and that is how He expects us to treat others.

If you wanted to be zealous for God in the Old Testament, you would study the covenant He made with the Israelites at Mount Sinai, which includes the ten commandments, rules for society, sacrifices, tabernacle items, etc. Why is it that we (correctly) tell people to be zealous for God, but then we tell them *nothing* of the New Covenant He has made with us? The Old Covenant was their whole way of life for many centuries. The New Covenant is also supposed to be our whole way of life, but it will be God's doing, and not ours.

People might think that Jesus came to do away with the Old Testament and start a new religion. But Jesus said He came to fulfill the Old Testament.

> Matthew 5:17-18 — "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled."

The word "fulfill" is in there twice. The New Testament was written in Greek, and in the Greek, those two "fulfills" are two totally different words. The first "fulfill" means "to fill up", and the second fulfill means "to happen." Here is another translation that I believe captures these differences.

> Matthew 5:17-18 BBE — Let there be no thought that I have come to put an end to the law or the prophets. I have not come for destruction, but to make complete. Truly I say to

you, Till heaven and earth come to an end, not the smallest letter or part of a letter will in any way be taken from the law, till all things are done.

In Matthew 5-7, Jesus is "making the law complete" by showing us how God not only wants outward obedience, but inward obedience too. Jesus shows us in these chapters that to obey the law in its fullest sense means to obey it within, in your heart and in your thoughts. Then He says, "Not the smallest letter or part of a letter will in any way be taken from the law, till all things are done." When Jesus died on the cross, He pronounced, "It is finished." All the things written about in the law and prophets have happened. The law of Moses will now go away. The fulfillment of that law, the New Covenant, will now be in place.

Please don't think that the ten commandments, written on stone for us to try our hardest to keep, have been replaced with the ten beatitudes, written on stone for us to try our hardest to keep. We do not replace one religious system with another religious system. I will give you three reasons why this is not the case:

1. God says, "I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts." Christians have something better than trying to obey another set of ten rules. Our very hearts and minds will change as the Holy Spirit comes to live on the inside of us.
2. The law said that if you want to be righteous before God, you need to keep all the commands in it. But Jesus said our righteousness is to be found in placing our faith in Him, not in our keeping the law or the beatitudes.
3. God also said, "For they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them." In the New Covenant, we will have the wonderful privilege of knowing God inwardly, by the Holy Spirit. We don't walk by trying to keep a set of rules, but by following the Holy Spirit, who reveals the will of God.

We need to take care that we don't turn Christianity into a set of rules and precepts. That is what Isaiah warns against in the next passage. When he mentions "rest" and "refreshing" below, I believe these are referring to Jesus, who offers us true rest and refreshing of our soul.

> Isaiah 28:12-13 — To whom He said, "This is the rest with which you may cause the weary to rest," and, "This is the refreshing"; Yet they would not hear. But the word of the LORD was to them, "Precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little," that they might go and fall backward, and be broken and snared and caught.

In contrast to precepts and rules, Jesus offers us to change us through something that is much more personal.

> Matthew 11:28-30 — "Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light."

We still have a yoke, but it isn't cold rules that we try to achieve in our own strength. Our yoke is to come to Jesus, surrender our sins, efforts, and everything, receive His love, keep our hearts on Him, and be obedient to the new heart He gives us.

Jesus lived His own life by means of the closeness of His Father. The word "Father" is in the book of John over one hundred times. Most of those times are Jesus referring to God as His Father. That is how incredibly vital Jesus' connection to the Father is. All of His ministry flowed from it. Jesus lived always abiding in His Father's love, and He also had perfect love for His Father. When Jesus was baptized at the beginning of His ministry, the Father audibly spoke.

> Matthew 3:17 — …Suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Also, when Jesus was transfigured before His disciples,

> Matthew 17:5 — …Suddenly a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!"

There was only one other audible voice of God in Jesus' ministry (John 12:28). Of the three times God audibly spoke, two of them were to confirm that Jesus is God's beloved Son, in whom He is well pleased. Jesus didn't just know God's love in His head. He spoke about it to others. God's love for Jesus was so special to Him that He didn't care what others thought about Him.

Jesus did not walk in His own human strength. He emptied Himself so that everything in His life would be what the Father was doing in Him. To show you how dependent Jesus was on His Father and not Himself, I included this list, which came from Andrew Murray's book, Humility. Look at how many times Jesus used the words "not" and "nothing" when talking of Himself.

- The Son can do nothing of Himself. John 5:19
- I can of Myself do nothing. John 5:30
- I do nothing of Myself. John 8:28
- I do not seek my own will. John 5:30
- I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will. John 6:38
- I do not receive honor from Men. John 5:41
- I do not seek My own glory. John 8:50
- I have not come of Myself. John 7:28
- Nor have I come of Myself but He sent Me. John 8:42
- My doctrine is not Mine. John 7:16
- The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority. John 14:10
- The word which you hear is not Mine. John 14:24
- I have not spoken on My own authority. John 12:49

This is a sobering, humbling list. There is not a trace of pride or self-confidence anywhere in these statements. Jesus came in human

form, but He definitely did not live by His human strength. He lived in His Father's sight, and His Father was His strength. Isaiah prophesied that it would be this way.

> Isaiah 49:5 — …For I shall be glorious in the eyes of the LORD, and My God shall be My strength.

Jesus was so close to His Father that He said,

> John 10:30 — "I and My Father are one."

He said to His disciple Philip,

> John 14:9 — … "He who has seen Me has seen the Father…"

Just as Jesus lived by the closeness of His Father, so we Christians are to live by our closeness with Jesus.

> John 6:57 — "As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me."

And just as Jesus said He could do nothing apart from His Father, so we Christians can do nothing apart from Jesus.

> John 15:4-5 — "Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

When Jesus says "you can do nothing", He is talking about doing work for His Kingdom. People *can* accomplish a lot in this world using their own strength. For example, after Noah's Flood, people tried to construct the tower of Babel that would reach into Heaven.

> Genesis 11:6 NIV — The LORD said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them."

Human ingenuity is very strong. God Himself said, "Nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them." But when it comes to the Kingdom of God, we are all spiritually dead in trespasses and sins. If

anything will be done for God, it will have to be through being close to Jesus.

If we could see how unable we are to accomplish anything for God's Kingdom apart from Jesus, this would motivate us to humble ourselves and stay close to Him. If we stop abiding in Him and worshiping Him, if we compromise and take it easy, then we are left to our flesh. Our flesh is still corrupt even after we get saved. And we will fall if left to our flesh. It is only those who abide in Christ who can avoid sin.

> 1 John 3:6 — Whoever abides in Him does not sin…

I personally am motivated to discipline my thoughts for that very reason. If a thought comes to mind that is sinful or from my flesh in some way, I say, "No. I need my Lord very badly. I can't risk anything that would entice me away from abiding in Him. If I begin entertaining this thought, it will lead to more ungodliness. So I can't afford to let this thought stay in my head." I know Jesus will always love me, even if my thoughts do stray into bad things. But I want not only to be loved, but to be used for His Kingdom. I want to bear much fruit for Jesus, but if I stop abiding in Him, then I can do nothing for Him.

Believing Jesus Christ is so important that it is a commandment.

> 1 John 3:23 — And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.

God loves all people. He has a wonderful covenant in store where He has promised to forgive us and change us. But again, hearing about Jesus and the New Covenant isn't enough. Our hearing the gospel of Jesus needs to be combined with believing the gospel of Jesus.

> Hebrews 4:2 — For indeed the gospel was preached to us as well as to them; but the word which they heard did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it.

We need to make up our minds that we believe Jesus really did love us and purchase salvation for us freely. It isn't because we were good enough. There's no amount of good things we can do to earn God's forgiveness. The New Covenant is something that we believe and glorify God for doing Himself.

If you truly believe, you will worship.

> 1 Peter 1:8 — whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory.

When Jesus restored sight to a blind man, he worshiped.

> John 9:38 — Then he said, "Lord, I believe!" And he worshiped Him.

His believing Jesus caused him to worship Jesus.

And similarly, unbelief will cause us to *not* worship Him. When Jesus went to Nazareth, they did not believe Him. And so Jesus said to them,

> Mark 6:4 — … "A prophet is not without honor except in his own country, among his own relatives, and in his own house."

Their unbelief made them to not honor (worship) Jesus.

If you believe that Jesus personally loved you and took your sins on the cross by His grace, you won't be able to help being thankful for that.

> 1 Corinthians 15:56-57 — The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

> 2 Corinthians 4:15 — For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God.
> 1 Peter 2:9 — But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light.
> Jude 1:24-25 — Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy, to God our Savior, Who alone is wise, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and forever. Amen.

I believe we will spend eternity giving all glory and honor to the One who loved us and died for us. Glory be to God!

In the New Covenant, the people of God will have a Kingdom that is within them. Jesus will be the King of this Kingdom. Jesus had preached the commandments of this Kingdom, with love and humility being what rules there. He had lived it Himself, loving His Father and His neighbor and having no trace of pride. But this Kingdom had not taken root yet in His hearers because they were not yet made alive by the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Cuts the New Covenant

During the Last Supper, Jesus had communion with His disciples. He took bread and said, “This is My body.” Then He took the cup, gave thanks, and gave the cup for everyone to drink from.

> Mark 14:24 — And He said to them, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many.”

He was going to shed His blood of the New Covenant the very next day. If the New Covenant is so important to Jesus that we remember it every time we take communion, then the respectful thing to do is to learn what the New Covenant means.

Three years earlier Jesus had mediated the New Covenant to them on the mountain, showing them what a new heart looked like. But He knew it would not work. One day Jesus would mediate the New Covenant inside their hearts through the Holy Spirit, but that time was not yet. His disciples, far from taking a bold stand for their Master, were about to all forsake Him.

After the Last Supper, Jesus went to the Mount of Olives with His disciples.

> Matthew 26:31 — Then Jesus said to them, "All of you will be made to stumble because of Me this night, for it is written: 'I will strike the Shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'"

Peter didn't think he was capable of such a sin as forsaking Jesus.

> Mark 14:29 — Peter said to Him, "Even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be."

Peter's claim that he would not deny Him might appear to be from love for the Lord, but it wasn't. It was from self-confidence. Jesus had taught them not to deny Him, and here He even warns them that they will deny Him, and they still did it anyway. The disciples greatly overestimated their ability to obey. They are being like the Israelites who said to Moses,

> Exodus 24:7 — …"All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient."

We have seen how badly that went. Both the Israelites and the disciples trusted the flesh. They had not been humbled yet.

The Christian life is not about looking to yourself to find the strength to be a good person! We walk by looking to Jesus. We believe His love for us. We abide continually in Him. We maintain a close walk with Him. We acknowledge we can do nothing apart from Him. The New Covenant is all about Jesus—what He did on the cross and what He does in us as we grow in knowing Him. *He is our boast.*

Jesus would later restore Peter, asking him, "Do you love Me more than these?" This time, instead of saying "Yes, Lord, even if all are made to stumble, yet I will not be," Peter says something more humble.

> John 21:15 — … He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." …

Peter's denial was a failure, but at least it caused him to humble himself.

When Jesus was at the Mount of Olives with His disciples, Judas came with a large group of people to arrest Jesus. Yet even here, look at Jesus' mercy on Judas, calling him friend.

> Matthew 26:50 — But Jesus said to him, "Friend, why have you come?" Then they came and laid hands on Jesus and took Him.

When they seized Him, Peter drew his sword and cut off the ear of one trying to arrest Him, but Jesus corrected him.

> Matthew 26:52 — … Jesus said to him, "Put your sword in its place, for all who take the sword will perish by the sword."

The Kingdom of God is within you, and in that Kingdom, love and mercy rule. Jesus could have told His disciples to fight and protect Him, but He didn't. Jesus was not going to break the law of love by telling His disciples to fight for Him. Even to the person whose ear Peter cut off, Jesus had compassion.

> Luke 22:51 — …He touched his ear and healed him.

Jesus is called the Lamb of God, and He was fulfilling that. A lamb will usually not harm anyone.

> Isaiah 53:7 — He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He opened not His mouth; He was led as a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so He opened not His mouth.

Many people would call that "weak." But if you are for some reason in need of compassion, you will want someone who is going to show you mercy, not someone who will take vengeance on you. And all of us *are* in such a state of needing compassion because we have all sinned against a Holy God. We all deserve eternal judgment.

> Isaiah 53:6 — All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way…

We need a Saviour who will always show us compassion and never take retribution on us. Jesus is fulfilling that role perfectly. Sometimes Jesus was bold with people. Sometimes He did point out their sin and warn them about hell. But it was never because Jesus was judgmental toward them. He was warning them in love that the law of Moses condemned them and they needed to believe Jesus to be saved.

After they captured Jesus, they brought Him to the High Priest where a council condemned Him to death. Peter was watching at a distance. Three different people said to Peter that he was also one of Jesus' followers. Peter, fearing he might suffer the same condemnation as Jesus, denied three times that he knew Him, fulfilling Jesus' prophecy about his denial.

The next morning they brought Jesus to Pilate, who was the governor. Pilate found nothing wrong with Jesus, but the crowd shouted out "Crucify Him!" Pilate, who feared the crowd more than doing what

was right, gave in to their evil demands and had Jesus flogged and crucified.

A few days before this, the crowds welcomed Jesus, saying "Hosannah to the son of David!" But their praises of Him did not last. The Holy Spirit was not given yet, so they had not been born again. Jesus had preached for three years about the Kingdom, about having a right heart, but the people did not yet have the power to obey it.

Mark records that at the third hour they crucified Him. At the sixth hour there was darkness over the land until the ninth hour. Jesus was in agony for six hours on the cross.

> Mark 15:34 — And at the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, "Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?"

Jesus had to be forsaken by God to pay for the sins of man because the punishment for sin is separation from God. But Jesus was also pointing us to Psalm 22, which begins with those same words, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" The first two thirds of this psalm are about the great sufferings that someone will endure, both physically and through being mocked. It is written by David, but it does not appear to describe any events that happened in David's life. I believe this psalm is a prophecy or a vision of David about the sufferings Jesus would endure on the cross. Here are some verses in the psalm that accurately describe what Jesus went through:

> Psalm 22:16 NIV — … they pierce my hands and my feet. (Fulfilled when they crucified Him.)
>
> Psalm 22:8 NIV — "He trusts in the LORD," they say, "let the LORD rescue him. Let him deliver him, since he delights in him." (Fulfilled in Matt 27:43).
>
> Psalm 22:18 NIV — They divide my clothes among them and cast lots for my garment. (Fulfilled in Matt 27:35).

When Jesus was near death, He said “I thirst.” Then they filled a sponge with sour wine and gave it to Him.

> John 19:30 — So when Jesus had received the sour wine, He said, “It is finished!” And bowing His head, He gave up His spirit.

Jesus died. He came for the purpose of laying His life down (John 12:27) and He achieved it. He shed the blood of the New Covenant, putting an end to the Old Covenant. Matthew records the next thing that happened.

> Matthew 27:51 — Then, behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom; and the earth quaked, and the rocks were split.

The veil of the temple was a wall that prevented us, sinners that we are, from approaching a Holy God and dying on the spot for that. We could never dwell in His Presence, we could never know Him, we could never have fellowship with Him because the veil blocked us from being close to God. That veil constantly enforced a sense of fear and shame in us for our sins.

If we could just have all our sins forgiven and have our dead spirits brought back to life, we could return to God. That is what Jesus accomplished for us when He laid His life down. He went into Heaven, into the true temple, and applied His blood there on behalf of you and I, making reconciliation for our iniquities. It is the best gift you could ever receive, and it’s free. We only need to believe it for ourselves, and we should always worship God for His wonderful gift! (2 Cor 9:15).

Two days later, God raised Jesus from the dead. The resurrection shows that God accepted the sacrifice of Jesus. If there were any flaw in Jesus at all, Jesus would still be paying for it. But there were no flaws in Him. Therefore, when Peter preached about Jesus, he said,

> Acts 2:24 — "Whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that He should be held by it."

When Jesus was on the cross and said, "It is finished," He may have been quoting the last words of Psalm 22, which are "He has done it!" This is the psalm that begins, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" The final third of that psalm is no longer about suffering. It is all praise and worship. Jesus has been resurrected! With the death and resurrection of Jesus, He gives us His righteousness, making us at one with God, and this good news will be proclaimed to future generations. The psalm ends with these two verses.

> Psalm 22:30-31 NIV — Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord. They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!

God has redeemed us from our transgressions, and for that we should be grateful and worship Him forever. He has done it! We don't need to have a sense of fear and shame for our sins anymore, no matter how many they are. *We can return to God.*

> Isaiah 44:22-23 —
> "I have blotted out, like a thick cloud, your transgressions,
> And like a cloud, your sins.
> *Return to Me*, for I have redeemed you."
> Sing, O heavens, for *the LORD has done it!*
> Shout, you lower parts of the earth;
> Break forth into singing, you mountains,
> O forest, and every tree in it!
> For the LORD has redeemed Jacob,
> And glorified Himself in Israel.

Chapter 6
Benefit 1: Eternally Loved and Forgiven

Many people have heard the good news that Jesus loves them and died for their sins. But they might not consider that Jesus was fulfilling the terms of the New Covenant when He did that:

> Jeremiah 33:18 — "nor shall the priests, the Levites, lack a man to offer burnt offerings before Me, to kindle grain offerings, and to sacrifice continually."

Jesus is always interceding for us and continually offering the blood of His sacrifice to God for our sins.

Daniel also includes Jesus' death for our sins as part of the New Covenant:

> Daniel 9:24 — "Seventy weeks are determined for your people and for your holy city, …To make reconciliation for iniquity, …"
>
> Daniel 9:26 — "... Messiah shall be cut off, but not for Himself;..."

Jesus, the Messiah, was cut off, and in doing so He made reconciliation for our iniquities.

Ezekiel may not mention the death of Christ, but he does say that God will make an everlasting covenant of peace with us.

> Ezekiel 37:26 — "Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; …"

The blood of Christ is what puts us at peace with God, as the next passage says.

> Ephesians 2:13-14 — But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, …

Before Jesus died, God forbear punishing our sins.

> Romans 3:25 — Whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed.

He passed over them until they were punished on the cross. Now that our sins have been paid for, He remembers them no more, and we truly are forgiven.

> Jeremiah 31:34 — "… For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

Take a look at the word "for" when Jeremiah says "For I will forgive their iniquity". "For" means "because". In the four verses that Jeremiah uses to describe the New Covenant, the reason the provisions all hold true is "because" God will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more. That is how important God's forgiveness is. God is very holy, and the Holy Spirit could only dwell inside of us and write His law on our hearts and minds if God first completely removes and forgives our sin, which He does. That is how forgiven we are.

I dare say this is the most important chapter in this book. The foundation of God's love and forgiveness needs to be laid before a person can live in the rest of the New Covenant. This is so important that the Apostle Paul wrote,

> Galatians 2:20-21 — "...The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God; for if righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

Those are strong words. The love and grace that Jesus gave to Paul were not just doctrines. They were very real to him. They were the guiding principles for how he lived his life. The love of Christ would lead Paul to write Romans 8:31-39 (which you may read on your own). The last two verses of that are:

> Romans 8:38-39 — For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

The love of Christ was also the compelling force of his ministry.

> 2 Corinthians 5:14 — For the love of Christ compels us, because we judge thus: that if One died for all, then all died;

Being kept forgiven, at peace with God, regardless of works, is a doctrine that the Bible calls grace. All of Paul's 13 books in the Bible have "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" somewhere in the beginning. And they all close with "Grace be with you" or something similar. Grace is how Paul both opens and closes his letters. Before Paul even addresses any of the correction he is going to bring in his letters, he reminds them of their foundation. God loves them, saves them, and keeps them by faith through grace apart from their works. If they don't understand grace, then any correction Paul brings to them will be works. It will sound like the law of Moses, which was the opposite of grace because it condemned even the smallest errors. But if Paul begins and ends his letters with "Grace be to you", then his readers will feel loved and valued, even though Paul has exposed places where they fall short.

If you ask many Christians if they are under the Old Covenant, they will respond, "No, I am under grace." That is true. God saves us by faith in Jesus apart from our works. But this is not the full picture.

Grace is one provision under the New Covenant. Christians aren't under the Old Covenant, but they *are* under the New Covenant. The Old Covenant was the way of life before Jesus had come. Besides the ten commandments, it had rules and judgments for many parts of society. The New Covenant is supposed to be the way of life after Jesus has come. God says in the New Covenant that you will be kept under grace, always at peace with God by faith. Another provision is that Jesus will be King over your life and your heart. Just as you are called to be under grace, you are also called to surrender your life to the lordship of Jesus. Let us make sure to not focus on one part of the covenant to the exclusion of the rest.

Isaiah 52:14-53:12 details the crucifixion that Jesus will endure when God lays on Him the iniquity of us all. We see a picture of the infinite love of Christ in the next verse.

> Isaiah 52:14 — Just as many were astonished at you, so His visage was marred more than any man, and His form more than the sons of men.

If I find myself feeling like Jesus doesn't love me, I remember the horrible torture He endured for me. He was marred, disfigured, more than any man. Only an incredible love could endure that.

Because of the cross, we will have peace with God. That is what Isaiah 54:7-17 is about. Isaiah describes the great peace that will be ours after Jesus dies for our sins, both peace with God and peace in our hearts. This is the greatest section in the Bible that I know of to describe how certainly we are set at peace with God. Here is part of it.

> Isaiah 54:7-10 — "For a mere moment I have forsaken you, but with great mercies I will gather you. With a little wrath I hid My face from you for a moment; But with everlasting kindness I will have mercy on you," says the LORD, your Redeemer. "For this is like the waters of Noah to Me; For as I have sworn that the waters of Noah would no longer cover

> the earth, so have I sworn that I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you. For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall My covenant of peace be removed," says the LORD, who has mercy on you.

God has infinite wrath on sin, but He will never have wrath on *us*.

The Covenant of David

Now I will share something that may be a little deep, but it will also be edifying.

In the beginning of King David's reign over Israel, God made a covenant with him. This covenant is in the Bible three times (2 Sam 7:8-17, 1 Chr 17:7-15, Ps 89:3-37). God said to David,

> Psalm 89:26-28 — "He shall cry to Me, 'You are my Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation.' Also I will make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. My mercy I will keep for him forever, and My covenant shall stand firm with him."

God is going to make David to be king forever. Before David, Saul was king, but God removed him for his transgressions. God isn't going to remove David from being king as He removed Saul. This covenant of David being king will stand firm with him.

And then it gets better. The same covenant God makes with David will also extend to his descendants. They also will become kings and their reign as kings will last forever.

> Psalm 89:29 — His seed (descendants) also I will make to endure forever, and his throne as the days of heaven.

What about the kings that will come forth in the line of David? Will they be removed for their transgressions?

> Psalm 89:30-37 — "If his sons forsake My law and do not walk in My judgments, if they break My statutes and do not keep My commandments, then I will punish their transgression with the rod, and their iniquity with stripes. *Nevertheless My lovingkindness I will not utterly take from him, nor allow My faithfulness to fail*. My covenant I will not break, nor alter the word that has gone out of My lips. Once I have sworn by My holiness; I will not lie to David: His seed shall endure forever, and his throne as the sun before Me; It shall be established forever like the moon, even like the faithful witness in the sky." Selah

The kings that come forth from David will not be removed for their transgressions, though they may be punished for them.

Many parts of the Old Testament are shadows of a future reality that will happen in the New Covenant, and I believe we have such a case here. King David is a shadow of the true King that God has chosen to rule His people, who is King Jesus. The following provisions were all said about David, but they could easily have also been said about Jesus:

> Psalm 89:26-28 — He shall cry to Me, 'You are my Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation.' Also I will make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth. My mercy I will keep for him forever, and My covenant shall stand firm with him.

Just like David, Jesus called God His Father, and God made Jesus His firstborn son. David was the highest king of his time, and Jesus will one day be the highest king when He rules the world as the King of Kings. God will keep David in His mercy forever, and God will keep Jesus in His mercy forever.

The psalm also says the seed (descendants) of King David would inherit the same covenant as David. They, too, would become and remain kings, even if they broke God's statutes and commandments. Believers are called the seed of Christ. And just as David's descendants would become kings, believers in Jesus will also become kings (Rev 1:6, 5:10). God said He will make David's seed to endure forever, even if they sin. That means God will make Christ's seed (you and I) to endure forever, even if we sin. I find Psalm 89:30-36 to be very comforting if I am troubled in my conscience about a fault of mine.

At Jesus baptism God said,

> Mark 1:11 — …"You are My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

This was extremely important for how Jesus lived His life. It was the first time God said something audibly to Him. When He was in the wilderness, the devil challenged it in two of the three temptations, saying "If You are the Son of God, then do this or that." Jesus spoke often about the Father's love for Him. Jesus said He abides in His Father's love (John 15:10). God said He will extend His love for David to David's descendants. In like manner, Jesus will extend the love of the Father to His own disciples.

> John 15:9 — "As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love."

The love of the Father was the most precious thing to Jesus, and the love of Christ should be the most precious thing to us.

At the end of David's life, part of his last words were these:

> 2 Samuel 23:5 KJV — Although my house be not so with God; yet he hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire, although he make it not to grow.

The everlasting covenant he refers to is the one we examined above: God will establish David's kingdom forever, and his descendants will

also be kings forever. David said that this covenant "is all my salvation and all my desire." I am convinced that the New Covenant God has given us is supposed to be the most valuable thing we have, just as God's covenant with David was the most valuable thing to him. Jesus became "all our salvation" when He died and paid for all of our sins. The question is, has Jesus and His forgiveness become "all our desire"? It ought to be. You always have a reason to rejoice if your sins are forgiven. Life may get very hard on you. Things may go worse than you imagined. But you have an eternal place in Heaven that is waiting for you. What is there on Earth to desire that can compete with that? Is there anything in this life that can compare to the value of your sins being completely forgiven? Many of us have allowed Jesus to become "all our salvation", but we need to allow Jesus to also become "all our desire."

I have learned that nothing in this life matters compared to knowing the love of Christ. The cares and concerns don't matter. Having a good career doesn't matter. Making my bosses happy with me doesn't matter. I found One that loves me and who will always love me. Always. What more could I want? I want others to know His infinite love too.

Manasseh, a Recipient of God's Unconditional Love

Some people believe they have sinned too far to be forgiven. They may give up hope of ever having a close walk with God because they think God would never completely forgive their sins. But they don't understand the unconditional love of God. God is love, and He will always be love. In that great love, He will always be willing to

forgive anyone who humbly repents of their sins, no matter how many or how evil those sins are.

There is a character in the Bible who will illustrate the unconditional love of God. His name is Manasseh. He was the most wicked king in Judah and probably in the whole Bible. But God loved this wicked man and redeemed him, and I believe he is in Heaven today. His story is found in 2 Chronicles 33 and 2 Kings 21. Among the many evils that Manasseh did, we read that he: raised altars for Baals, made Asherah poles, worshiped the host of Heaven, built altars in the house of the Lord, sacrificed his sons to his idols, practiced soothsaying, used witchcraft and sorcery, consulted mediums and spiritists, and caused the nation of Judah to do more evil than the nations that God drove out of the Promised Land before Israel conquered it. We also read of this wicked man,

> 2 Kings 21:16 — Moreover Manasseh shed very much innocent blood, till he had filled Jerusalem from one end to another, besides his sin by which he made Judah sin, in doing evil in the sight of the LORD.

You could compare King Manasseh with Hitler. Both of them were evil leaders who murdered large numbers of innocent people. Many people would have written off Manasseh and said he is too hardened in sin to ever change. Others would say that God could no longer love a man after he did that much evil. Yet, after all the evil he had done, God did not stop loving Manasseh. He still wanted Manasseh to know Him. God caused the nation of Assyria to capture Manasseh and bring him to repentance.

> 2 Chronicles 33:11-13 — Therefore the LORD brought upon them the captains of the army of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh with hooks, bound him with bronze fetters, and carried him off to Babylon. Now when he was in affliction, he implored the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers, and prayed to

> Him; and He received his entreaty, heard his supplication, and brought him back to Jerusalem into his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the LORD was God.

We live in a world where people can withdraw their love from you over small offenses. But King Manasseh committed extremely large offenses, and God did not withdraw His love from him. God was willing to forgive him even after all the sins he had done. I believe his story should become more well-known. If we can see God's grace towards the worst of sinners, it will help us to have more grace in our hearts towards others too.

A Warning

I do want to give a bit of a warning here. Whenever you speak about God's infinite love or about grace, there is a danger that some people will "turn the grace of God into a licence for evil" (Jude 1:4 NET). God knows our hearts when we sin. He knows if we are aware that we are sinning or if we are sinning in ignorance. He also knows if our sin was intentional or if it was from the weakness of the flesh. In the case of Manasseh, his many sins were done in ignorance. He believed in idols, and so he set up altars to them. God warned him through prophets, but he did not listen to them (2 Chr 33:10, 18). Then God took more drastic measures. He used the Assyrians to afflict him and bring him to a place where he saw his need for God and where he humbled himself greatly before Him. God heard his sincere prayer and brought him back to Judah where he was king once more. The next thing we read is, "*Then* Manasseh knew that the LORD was God." He didn't know before this experience that there is only one God, the God of Israel.

God has unconditional love for us whether our sin was intentional or in weakness. But if it is intentional, if you know better and you *deliberately choose* to openly act out the sinful desires you feel, then I believe you do need to take it seriously. You should confess it to God, repent from it, and choose that you will not do it again. Even in the epistle that champions grace, Galatians, Paul warns them:

> Galatians 5:19-21 — Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that *those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.*

He also warns them later on,

> Galatians 6:7-8 — Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction…

None of us is perfect. We all have a sinful flesh to contend with. Sometimes we struggle to defeat sin and it seems like we are fighting a losing battle against it. Paul tells us to restore these people in gentleness.

> Galatians 6:1 — Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.

It can be difficult to know how hard to go on a Christian who is committing sin. It may help to ask them these questions: Are you keeping your sins to your thoughts? Have you reached the place of acting on it? Is it intentional? Do you hate your sin? How long has it been going on?

If we were under the law there would be no room for gentleness. Every small sin would be a matter of eternal salvation, and there

would be no room for any error. But as it is, we are not under the law but under grace. We can show gentleness and love to people in their sin because they are still loved and kept in a state of being forgiven, even during their struggle.

If we feel like we are caught in a continual sin, we have One who is a continual sacrifice to God. Exodus 29:38-42 describes a continual burnt offering that the Israelites were commanded to make as a "sweet aroma" to God. Every single day the priests would sacrifice two lambs, one in the morning, and one in the evening. The sacrifices of the Old Testament all point to Jesus. Jesus is our continual burnt offering. Yes, He offered Himself 2000 years ago. But, Jesus is continually able to intercede and present the burnt offering of Himself before God on our behalf.

> Hebrews 10:20 NET — by the fresh and living way that he inaugurated for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh,

Do you see that word "fresh"? The Greek word for it is prosphatos. It means "freshly slaughtered." The sacrifice of Jesus is before the Father "freshly slaughtered."

> Revelation 5:6 — And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, …

God never gets tired of beholding the Lamb that was slain (slaughtered). The Lamb is continually presented before the Father. The Lamb always remains a fresh sacrifice to God. If you feel you have sinned too much, or too often with the same thing or that you have exhausted the limits of God's forgiveness, God will not get tired of forgiving you. The sacrifice of Jesus is always new and fresh, a "sweet aroma" to God.

When Jesus was crucified, they pierced His side, and a fountain of blood and water came forth from it. Zechariah writes about this event,

> Zechariah 12:10 — "...They will look on Me whom they pierced…"

Then a few verses later Zechariah writes,

> Zechariah 13:1 — "In that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness."

That fountain for sin and uncleanness never runs dry. There is no shortage to His grace. If you fall a thousand times a day, then a thousand times thank Him for loving you and forgiving you. And if you don't remember to do that a thousand times, don't fear. The moment you repent, all of your sin is put away, even if it is a lot.

The Law Condemns, Jesus Doesn't

One of the reasons God gave us the Old Covenant is to make us see we have all sinned before a Holy God. We all stand condemned, and there is nothing we can do to remove that condemnation. We are not able to save ourselves.

But our guilt is not a reflection of whether God loves us or not. People make the mistake of thinking that because they *deserve* to be condemned, that must mean that God *wants* them to be condemned. No. God is love, and no matter how much condemnation we deserve, God's heart is to love us and save us.

> John 3:17 — "For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

The law of Moses will accuse us to the Father, but Jesus never will.

> John 5:45 — "Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you—Moses, in whom you trust."

The Pharisees were experts in the law, which judges everyone. That is probably what made the Pharisees judgmental people. But Jesus came for the opposite reason of judging us. He said to them,

> John 8:15 — "You judge according to the flesh; I judge no one."

Jesus does have power to judge us, though, because God has given it to Him.

> John 5:22 — "For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son."

After we die, Jesus will judge us, and we will either be with Him or separated from Him.

> Hebrews 9:27 — And as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment,

Our judgment is *after* we die, not before that. We are called to dwell in the love of Christ. We cannot afford to think, "I have sinned too far. Jesus has judged me, and there's no hope left." Maybe you have committed some large sins. There can definitely be consequences to that. Yet God will always remain love, and He will be faithful to forgive even large sins you have done if you confess them.

Many of us aren't committing large sins, but we are aware of many smaller faults that we have. James writes,

> James 3:2 — For we all stumble in many things…

If you have a view of God as an angry judge, waiting to punish every little sin, you will feel very depressed and hopeless because you know you will never be good enough to please Him. But that is not how the New Covenant works. Grace covers our faults. It is not in the heart of God to judge us for our many faults. That is why He has *covenanted* with us to always love us and pay for them all. God does not judge us for them. They were all judged on the cross. They will not cause God to remove His grace or our peace with Him. The Old Covenant revealed that we are all sinners. But the New Covenant revealed that God's love is even far greater than our sins, and our sins will not

break the peace we have with God. Even with our faults, God delights in us now. We are His children.

> 1 John 3:1 — Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! …

A Love that Passes Understanding

The brain is not able to comprehend the infinite love of God. But we are called to live our Christian life out of the revelation of that love. And since our brain can't understand that love, then our brain can't walk the Christian life. The love of God resides in our hearts. We must live the Christian life from our hearts, not our heads.

Paul prayed to the Father,

> Ephesians 3:16-19 — … that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man, that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the width and length and depth and height— to know the love of Christ which passes knowledge; that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Note also in this prayer that the Spirit strengthens your inner man. He doesn't strengthen your flesh or your brain. The love of Christ is so infinite that you cannot understand it. You can only experience it and believe it. And it's very important that you do. Why? Look at the next phrase: "that you may be filled with all the fullness of God." That is the goal that humanity is trying to attain. We want the fullness of God. And the answer to it is right here. If you want the fullness of God, you must know the great love of Christ! You cannot measure the width and length and depth and height of His love. It *passes* knowledge. It passes what all of your mind, your analyzing, and your thinking, can

understand. Such love is revealed to us by the Spirit, who lives in your *heart,* not your head.

The next verse shows again that the love of God is poured out in our *hearts* (not our heads).

> Romans 5:5 — Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

Many of us strive to understand everything. We try to understand our school teachers, the skills we need for a job we take, how to file taxes, how to drive a car lawfully, and so on. All of that knowledge lives in your head. It can feel good to accomplish something with your head. *You* are the one who can take credit for it. But God wants us to know the tremendous love of Christ and to dwell in that love. We cannot do this with the head. The love of God isn't something you know; it is something you believe. Faith is of the heart. "For with the heart one believes unto righteousness…" (Rom 10:10). To walk by faith will mean that we stop trying to walk by the understanding. It will feel humbling to do this. You won't be able to take credit for something good that happened if you were just trusting God and God gave you a heart to do it. *God* will receive the glory in that case. That is how we are to live—believing the love of God and yielding to what He puts in our heart.

Consequences of Legalism

If we don't believe that God loves and accepts us by grace, then the only alternative is to believe that God loves and accepts us by our obedience to the law. That will lead to us becoming fearful, legalistic, and mean towards others. This was happening to the people below (whom Paul calls "Cretans").

> Titus 1:12 — One of them, a prophet of their own, said, "Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons."

If some preachers were to speak to them, they might rebuke all the lying, the evil, and the laziness that they see in the Cretans. But that would miss the point. Those things are just symptoms of legalism. Here is how Paul wanted the teachers of legalism to be addressed.

> Titus 1:13-14 — … Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not giving heed to Jewish fables and commandments of men who turn from the truth.

The way Paul wants to deal with them is by making them believe that Jesus loved them and died for their sins, and that *this* is what makes them righteous (not the law or commandments of men). If they accept that Jesus accomplished their righteousness on the cross, they won't put themselves under the burden of keeping rules. Being under the burden of the law will sap the joy out of anyone and make them depressed, unmotivated, and lazy. But if they become dead to the law and strong in the faith that Jesus loved them, freely paid for their salvation, and keeps them under grace, their joy and motivation will return.

Like the Cretans above, the Galatians were also legalistic. They began turning to rules. They were losing the love for Paul that they used to have. Paul says to them,

> Galatians 4:15 — What then was the blessing you enjoyed? For I bear you witness that, if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me.

They were also starting to mistreat each other.

> Galatians 5:15 — But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!
>
> Galatians 5:26 — Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.

Why does Paul have to warn them about devouring one another? Because putting yourself under the law will cause you to not walk in love. Maybe preachers would say to the Galatians, "Stop fighting with

each other!" But their fighting is just a symptom of being under the law. If the Galatians knew how much they were loved by God, and if they understood that God keeps them under grace and that they are not under the law, then they would be treating each other better.

There are a lot of mental and stress disorders out there. People put themselves under a lot of pressure to perform. The result of such mental pressure is behavioral problems, psychosomatic diseases, and other bodily symptoms. People often seek medical treatment for their symptoms, and that is fine and well. But, a lot of times the mental pressure that is causing the disease happens because they haven't entrusted their lives to the love and grace of God. They haven't released their burdens to Him, which He never told them to carry. We do not need to perform to be accepted by God. Our simple faith in Jesus makes us accepted by Him. Stress and torment will often leave when we believe God loves and accepts us apart from the work we do.

> 1 John 4:18 — There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment. But he who fears has not been made perfect in love.

Receiving the infinite love of God is so important that it is the key to overcoming many problems:

- Worry (Matt 6:30)
- Fear of man (Heb 13:5-6)
- Forgiving others (Eph 4:32)
- Loving others (1 John 4:11)
- Joy (1 Pet 1:8)
- Identity as sons (1 John 3:1)
- Boldness and courage (2 Cor 3:12)
- Lack of motivation (1 Tim 4:9-10)

A person who lives by grace:

- Won't be proud, like the Pharisee who thought he was better than the tax collector (Luke 18)
- Won't be judgmental when they hear of other's failures
- Won't strive and stress to keep the law since they know God already accepts them by faith
- Won't compare themselves to others because they find their value in God's love for them
- Will freely love people because they understand they are freely loved
- Will have the power of God moving through them because faith is the means by which God supplies the Spirit (Gal 3:2,5)

You could try *teaching* people not to be proud, not to be judgmental, not to stress, etc. But if living by God's grace gets established, then the rest will often fall into place.

Choose to Believe His Love

There are wonderful benefits of the New Covenant. God promises to forgive and forget all of our sins. He promises to give us His Holy Spirit. He promises to write His laws on our heart. But all of these will happen *through faith*. Be convinced that all that Jesus accomplished was for you, personally.

What *is* faith? Like many of you, I was taught that faith is to believe that God will give you something you ask for, and have no doubts about it. I agree with that, but for it to help you, there is something deeper that needs to be in place. Before you can truly believe and expect that God will answer your prayers, you must first settle an even more important question: Does God forgive you of all of your sins on account of the sacrifice of His Son? If you can believe that

God completely forgives and accepts you, then your conscience will be clean. Only then can your heart expect Him to come through for you.

Many of us know that Hebrews 11 is the great faith chapter. I've heard many ministers preach from it, encouraging the people to be like these men of faith. But there is a foundation that needs to be laid first. The four chapters preceding this talk about all that was accomplished by Jesus, His blood, His sacrifice, and His Great High Priesthood. Below is a good summary of those four chapters, which needs to be established first before we can trust God for other things.

> Hebrews 10:19-23 — Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil (guilty) conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

To truly trust the Most Holy God to be good to you after all your sins, your conscience must be washed from all feelings of guilt. Guilt keeps us away from drawing close to God. The only thing that can wash our conscience free from guilt is the blood of Christ.

> Hebrews 9:14 — how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Jesus shed His blood for us, but it is only effective if we believe it for ourselves.

> Romans 3:25 KJV — Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation *through faith* in his blood…

Psalm 136 has 26 verses in it. At the end of every verse, it says "For His mercies endure forever." It is in there 26 times. The Bible is driving home a point: God's mercies really do endure forever. God really is *that* good, loving, merciful, and forgiving. In a world that judges, condemns, rebukes, and is harsh for any fault we have, God will never stop being merciful to our sins. But it is up to us to believe it, be assured of it, rest in it, and praise Him for it.

Paul even went so far as to say the way to reign in life is to receive (by faith) the abundance of grace through Jesus.

> Romans 5:17 — … Much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.

You must receive the infinite abundance of grace for yourself. Believe it. There is no shortage of it. The problem happens when we *believe* there is a shortage of it. Neither our sins, nor our trials mean that the grace of Jesus has run out on us. It never will.

Life can be full of trouble and suffering. None of us can avoid them. Sometimes it is our own doing that brings about our troubles. Things may even get so bad that it appears God has forsaken us for our sins. When your sins and everything around you testify against you and say that God has forsaken you, you have a choice to make. You can despair and believe your sins are too much for God to forgive, or you can take your stand on the blood of Christ and believe that God completely forgives and accepts you on account of that blood.

That was the situation I was in when I was at the lowest point of my life. Everything in my life was horrible and only getting worse the more I prayed. It was also my own fault that my life was so bad, which made it harder for me to believe God would help me out of it. The worse things became, the more I believed God had forsaken me. I thought I had probably sinned too far to be forgiven. It came to the

point where I could have either believed that God had left me because of my sins, or I could believe that the blood of Christ atoned for my sins and God forgave me. You may read the last chapter to learn the full story of how God led me to believing on the blood of Christ. It was only then that my life slowly turned around for the better.

People once brought a paralyzed man to Jesus. Since they could not get to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof to lower the paralyzed man to Jesus. But look at the first thing Jesus addresses.

> Mark 2:5 NIV — When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven."

Jesus wanted to lay that foundation first. His sins were forgiven. *Then*, a little later on, Jesus healed him.

To say you trust someone means that you believe they will be good and faithful to you. What better compliment could you give to someone than to trust them? What better way to honor God than to trust that He really did take our sins on the cross, that He really does love us and forgive us? It is such an honor to God to trust Him that faith is more precious to Him than gold tried by fire.

> 1 Peter 1:7 — that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

Whenever someone trusts me with something valuable, it is an honor. That person judged that I am good to them, that I won't let them down, and that I am able to come through for them. God went to great lengths to save you from hell. Will you not trust His salvation? Don't let your past sins make you doubt His love. Put your past behind you, as Paul did.

> Philippians 3:13 — Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things

> which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead.

Faith is not only what opens the door to the blessing of the New Covenant. Faith is a *lifestyle* in the New Covenant. People once asked Jesus,

> John 6:28-29 — … "What shall we do, that we may work the works of God?" Jesus answered and said to them, "This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He sent."

I believe that is profound. If you want to become one who by nature is doing the works of God on the Earth, the way that will happen is by believing in Jesus Christ.

Faith in the love of Christ is how the Apostle Paul lived his life, as we saw earlier.

> Galatians 2:20 — "... The life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

We read all the promises of the New Covenant, of what God will do when He sends Jesus into the world. But it is all for nothing if we do not believe Jesus. All the forgiveness of sins, the blessings, the indwelling of the Spirit, the personal knowing of God, are ours only if we believe God's Son, Jesus.

There is a verse that is quoted three times in the New Testament (which is a lot):

> Habakkuk 2:4 — "... The just shall live by his faith."

It is quoted in Galatians 3:12, Hebrews 10:38, and in the next verse.

> Romans 1:17 — For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith."

"From faith to faith" is translated in the New Living Translation as "from start to finish by faith." It all happens through faith. We can

preach the blessings of God, but they will do us no good if we don't believe Jesus. Choose to believe that what Christ did on the cross is for *you*, and thank Him for it.

Chapter 7
Benefit 2: Able to Love God with All the Heart

The sin of idolatry was a struggle for Israel throughout the entire Old Testament. Neither the leadership of the judges nor the kings was able to destroy this sin from their nation. God always wanted to receive all of our love and to not share us with another. But the tendency of mankind after Adam and Eve fell is to set our hearts on other things. God took the initiative to change our wayward hearts when He created a New Covenant with us. God says that He will be our God and we shall be His people.

> Jeremiah 31:33 — "... I will be their God, and they shall be My people."
>
> Jeremiah 32:38-39 — "They shall be My people, and I will be their God; then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them."
>
> Ezekiel 36:25 — "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols."
>
> Ezekiel 37:23 — "They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols, nor with their detestable things, nor with any of their transgressions; but I will deliver them from all their dwelling places in which they have sinned, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be My people, and I will be their God."

In the days of the Old Testament, idolatry was widespread around the world. An idol was a statue made of wood or stone, and it had no power in it since it wasn't alive. People would worship these idols believing the idols would give them protection, food, or other needs. Unfortunately, the worship of these gods would often involve very evil practices like prostitution or even child sacrifice.

> Deuteronomy 12:31 — "... Every abomination to the LORD which He hates they have done to their gods; for they burn even their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods."

God destroyed nations in the Old Testament because of their perversion and murder, and idol worship was a cause of that. But God doesn't hate idolatry just because of the evil practices it involves. He hates idolatry because He doesn't want us to worship anything besides Him.

Nor does God want us to make an image of Him and worship it. The Bible says that no man has seen God. Even at Mount Sinai, when God descended on the mountain and it blazed with fire, no man saw God at that time (Deut 4:12, 15). We cannot make a statue of Him because we do not know what He looks like. Even the massive universe that God created is not able to contain Him (1 Kgs 8:27). It would be wrong to reduce the eternal God to a graven image and to worship it. That is the second commandment.

> Exodus 20:4-5 — "You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God…"

People might not think that a loving God is jealous, but He is. He is jealous to be the only One to receive worship.

> Exodus 34:14 — "... You shall worship no other god, for the LORD, whose name is Jealous, is a jealous God."

God is especially jealous that His own people would worship Him alone. He feels so strongly about this that He even prescribes the death penalty for anyone who worships other gods (Deut 17:2-5).

When I first read through the Bible, I was disturbed by all of the wars that I read about in Joshua and Judges. It looked like battle after battle. I wondered why a loving God would command His people to make war against so many nations. The next verse shows two of the reasons they fought so many wars.

> Deuteronomy 9:5 — "It is not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD your God drives them out from before you, and that He may fulfill the word which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

One reason for all the battles was that God was driving out the wickedness of the nations that Israel was fighting against. Another reason was that God had sworn 400 years earlier to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their descendants (the Israelites) would live on that land. For the Israelites to possess the land, they would have to fight against and defeat the nations that were currently living on that land. God is serious about fulfilling His promises, and He is serious about getting rid of wickedness, as shown by the many wars that He commanded to fulfill these two goals. In the days of the New Covenant, God's Kingdom is now in the heart. He no longer commands wars. He loves all people and wants them to repent. But in the days of the Old Covenant, God often commanded His people to fight to establish His Kingdom on Earth.

After God's people conquered the land under the leadership of Joshua, a new generation of people was born that had not seen God's miracles. These people backslid into idolatry, and this provoked the

jealousy of God. Such is God's displeasure of idols that He handed His own people, whom He loves, into enemy hands until they cried out, confessed their sins, and put away their idols. Then God would raise up a judge who would lead the Israelites into battle, and God would give victory to His people. The sin of idolatry was a third reason for many of the battles in the early days of Israel. Many thousands of lives were lost because of this sin.

While the Israelites were still in the wilderness, God gave Moses the command,

> Deuteronomy 6:4-5 — "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."

That is called the shema. It comes right after the ten commandments in Deuteronomy. It is a centerpiece of being a Jew. They even write it on their phylacteries (straps they wear on their head and arm).

Many centuries later, Jesus referenced this passage and went on to say that this was the greatest commandment.

> Matthew 22:35-38 — Then one of them, a lawyer, asked Him a question, testing Him, and saying, "Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?" Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the first and great commandment."

Jesus continued, saying,

> Matthew 22:39-40 — "And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Loving God and loving people are not only the two greatest commandments: The rest of the law depends on us first keeping both of these. If we do not love God with all the heart, or our neighbor as ourself, we cannot keep the rest of the law either. To love God with all the heart, soul, and mind means to love Him with all of our being.

There is no part of us that is left out and is permitted to not love God. Your thoughts, your heart, your emotions, and your actions all belong to God.

I once did a search in the Bible for verses that contain "love" and "God". To my surprise, there were 11 verses in Deuteronomy that said "love the Lord your God" or something similar. That is a lot of times. God is serious about us loving Him.

The church in Ephesus will demonstrate Jesus' desire for us to love Him. This church was the first of seven churches that Jesus personally addressed in Revelation 2-3. Jesus acknowledged that this church was doing all the right things. He saw their work, their patience, their perseverance, and that they tested those who claimed to be apostles and found them false. Everything they were doing was right. But then Jesus tells them this:

> Revelation 2:4-5 — "Nevertheless I have this against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent and do the first works, or else I will come to you quickly and remove your lampstand from its place—unless you repent."

Do you see how very important it is to love Jesus? Jesus actually told them to go *back* and do the first works because they loved Jesus more in their earlier days than in the day Jesus spoke this. Remember, everything we do hangs on the two greatest commandments. This church wasn't keeping them from the heart. Therefore Jesus told them to drop all that they were doing and go back to where they loved Him with all of their heart. I think it is profound that it was more important to Jesus that we love Him with all our heart than that we do all the right things.

Paul pronounced only two curses in the New Testament. One curse was against those who taught a false gospel (Gal 1:8-9). The other

was against anyone who does not love the Lord Jesus (1 Cor 16:22). Preaching a false gospel is a terrible thing to do, and we all know that. But not loving the Lord Jesus is just as bad.

> Isaiah 54:5 — For your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is His name; and your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel; He is called the God of the whole earth.

Jesus is our Maker (Col 1:16). One day He will become our Husband. He is also our Redeemer. It is only right that He should want us to love Him with all of our being. It is His great love for us that motivates us to love Him back.

> 1 John 4:19 — We love Him because He first loved us.

Jesus, the Bridegroom

All of us want to be valued, cherished, cared for, and loved, even in the midst of our faults. We want someone who will never judge us, never condemn us, and never give up on us. We all want love.

Jesus is often spoken of as our Bridegroom, and the church as His bride. He is our Creator, and the reason He created you and I is for Him. He is acquainted with every detail of your life. He knows everything about you. He sees everything you do. He purchased you at a large price because He loves you. We were meant to live in love—in His love for us and in our love for Him. That is what we will do in Heaven.

Long ago, God made Adam and Eve, and they dwelled in paradise, the garden of Eden, in the very Presence of God. But then they disobeyed God, and they noticed they were naked. Then they heard God walking in the garden in the cool of the day. Adam and Eve hid themselves among the trees. Shame had entered their lives. God made

coats of skin to cover Adam and Eve, but then He banished them from being in His Presence.

Shame has entered our lives too. If we are to ever return to the closeness of love that they had in Eden, something will have to be done about shame. Thanks be to God, when Christ offered up Himself, He completely forgave us and took away our shame also. Now we are free to:

> Psalm 100:4-5 — Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, and into His courts with praise. Be thankful to Him, and bless His name. For the LORD is good; His mercy is everlasting, and His truth endures to all generations.

Jesus is *very* good. His mercies are everlasting. They are more than enough to atone for every shameful thing we have done. After Adam was banished from God, he could never "enter into His gates (of Eden) with thanksgiving." Aside from his own shame, a cherubim with a flaming sword would have stopped him (Gen 3:24).

But all that is gone now in Christ. We can "enter into His courts with praise." Our sin isn't just covered. It is removed. Sin entered the world and tried to stop the wonderful love that was expressed between God and man. Jesus atoned for all our sin, and man can return now to giving and receiving love from Him without shame.

Psalm 45 is widely taken to be a psalm of love between Jesus (the Bridegroom) and the church (His bride). Look at the feelings they have for each other. They freely love each other, and they have no shame.

> Psalm 45:2, 8, 11, 14-15 — You are fairer than the sons of men; Grace is poured upon Your lips; Therefore God has blessed You forever. ... All Your garments are scented with myrrh and aloes and cassia, out of the ivory palaces, by which they have made You glad. ... So the King will greatly desire your beauty; Because He is your Lord, worship Him. ... She

> shall be brought to the King in robes of many colors; The virgins, her companions who follow her, shall be brought to You. With gladness and rejoicing they shall be brought; They shall enter the King's palace.

To enjoy such closeness, you do need to have the proper reverence for God. It is hard to sing to God if you haven't trusted the mercies of Christ to forgive you. On the other hand, it is also difficult to sing to God if your life doesn't truly fear, exalt, and have the highest respect for Him. Those two qualities, a reverent fear of God and a trust in His mercy, must be present if someone is to love God.

> Psalm 33:18 — Behold, the eye of the LORD is on those who fear Him, on those who hope in His mercy.

The Song of Songs

In the mid-1800s there was a missionary who went to China to spread the gospel. His name is Hudson Taylor. He founded the China Inland Mission, which has sent hundreds of more missionaries into China, with many thousands of souls being saved through them. Hudson wrote a book called Union and Communion. It is his commentary on the Song of Songs in the Bible. The insights I share in this section come from Hudson's book.

The Song of Songs is about a groom and his bride. It is filled with love language, like Psalm 45 above. Hudson believed the Song was an allegory between Christ and His bride, the church. That is the view I will adopt in this section. Not everyone agrees with this allegory. However, the bride learns several lessons in this story about treating her groom, and I believe these are lessons that the church needs to learn about treating their Lord.

The Song of Songs starts off with the bride and groom expressing their affection toward each other. All is well. But unknown to the bride, there is still selfishness in her that needs to be rooted out. She makes a statement that is a little telling of her.

> Song of Songs 2:16 — My beloved is mine, and I am his…

That might not look so bad, but look at the order of the two thoughts in that verse. Her first thought is of herself: "My beloved is *mine*." And only after that is she concerned about the groom: "and I am his."

Just after she says this, a problem arises. She has taken her eyes off the groom, and now she cannot find him.

> Song of Songs 3:2 — "I will rise now," I said, "And go about the city; In the streets and in the squares I will seek the one I love." I sought him, but I did not find him.

Their separation does not last long. She quickly finds him and says "I held him and would not let him go." And for a time she follows through. They are reunited and they return to enjoying each other's love.

But their union does not last. One day the groom comes to see her late at night, when she is asleep in bed. The groom knocks on her door. Here is how she responds.

> Song of Songs 5:3 — I have taken off my robe; How can I put it on again? I have washed my feet; How can I defile them?

The bride has taken the groom for granted. Rather than get up from bed immediately to open the door for him, she listens to her own flesh, which wants to stay comfortably in bed.

Eventually she gets up to open the door for him, but it is too late.

> Song of Songs 5:6 — I opened for my beloved, But my beloved had turned away and was gone. My heart leaped up

> when he spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer.

The bride loses sight of the groom a second time. The groom does still love her, but he knows he needs to do something about her bride's indifference toward him. She needs to learn to love him more than this. This time he departs from her for a longer time than before, and it becomes much more difficult for her to find him.

The bride begins looking around the city for her groom, but he isn't there. To add to her despair, the watchmen of the city, who are supposed to protect her, abuse her instead. She finds the women of the city, and she charges them, saying, "If you find my beloved, tell him I am lovesick." The women ask, "Who is your beloved, that you so charge us?" She responds,

> Song of Songs 5:10 — My beloved is white and ruddy, chief among ten thousand.

She calls to mind how great and wonderful her groom is, and she continues for the next six verses declaring his praises.

Then, as if hearing her praise him, the groom returns to her. The two are reunited. Having gone through all of that, the bride's heart has changed. She makes another statement, which shows she is more mature than before.

> Song of Songs 6:3 — I am my beloved's, and my beloved is mine…

That is similar to the first statement she made, but the order is reversed. Now, the first thought in her mind is "I am my beloved's." That has now become more important than her second thought, "and my beloved is mine." The word "mine" is no longer found in her first thought, as it was earlier. The bride is putting away her selfishness. She is learning that to get along well with the groom, she must surrender her own desires, and she must be ready at all times to do whatever the groom wants.

Then the bride and the groom begin to enjoy each other's company even more than before. The bride doesn't neglect the groom anymore. The groom tells her of his great love for her. He delights in her. The bride is overcome with his love. She discovers a depth of love that she had not known before. Her eyes are opened to a love that means more than the world. She makes a third statement.

> Song of Songs 7:10 — I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me.

Self is no longer first as it was in the beginning. Self is not second either, as it was a little earlier. Self is not even there. The word "mine" is nowhere to be found. It is replaced with "and his desire is toward me." She has learned what truly matters. In light of this infinite love, how could she any longer be selfish and think about what is hers? Is the groom's love and closeness not enough? Is there anything that can compare to that love?

The bride answers that herself.

> Song of Songs 8:7 — Many waters cannot quench love, nor can the floods drown it. If a man would give for love all the wealth of his house, it would be utterly despised.

Nothing can compare to that love. She accepts that she belongs to the groom and the groom can tell her to do whatever he wants to. And she also accepts that the groom loves her and delights in her. The groom will never do her wrong. He is worthy for her to lay down her life and all that is hers.

I believe the bride's transformation above is the same transformation that everyone in the church needs to go through. We are all in a process both of laying down our lives and also of believing that Jesus loves us and delights in us. If we could see how wonderful Jesus is to us, we would find it easier to let go of things in our lives so that He can be everything to us.

Loving God Alone

Jesus was once teaching His disciples about being faithful with the money God has entrusted to them. Then He said,

> Luke 16:13 — "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (money)."

That last sentence was not well-received by everyone.

> Luke 16:14 — Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him.

The Pharisees made themselves look like good people to others. But God doesn't care about that. He looks at the heart, and He saw that theirs were given over to things besides God.

> Luke 16:15 — And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God."

I believe Jesus is saying that if you highly esteem anything besides God, then you love it, and it has caused you to not love God with all of your heart. That makes it an abomination in the sight of God. Money can be something people love besides God, but anything else could also take God's place in our heart.

> 1 John 2:15-17 — Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.

To set your heart on something besides God is called coveting. Paul wrote that coveting is actually the sin of idolatry. We may not bow down to idols of wood and stone, but if we love something besides God, then that has become an idol also.

> Colossians 3:5 — Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and *covetousness, which is idolatry.*

How many things in our lives or in our culture do we love or highly esteem? Those things may be idols. Maybe they aren't a sin in themselves, but the love of them is. I know this isn't a happy thing to think about. I won't claim to know at what point something becomes "highly esteemed" or at what point something becomes an idol. But if you are serious about loving God with all your heart, it is worth considering whether anything in your life has become an idol.

Jesus gave a parable of sowing seed on four types of soil to show four types of people who hear the gospel. Some seed fell by the wayside, some fell on stony ground, some fell among thorns, and some seed fell on good ground. The seed that fell among thorns is what I want to look at. This seed did manage to grow, but thorns also grew up with it, and no fruit was produced. Jesus explained the meaning of this parable to his disciples.

> Mark 4:18-19 — "Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful."

I believe these represent Christians, but they have things in their heart that do not belong there. Jesus taught in Matthew 6:25-34 that God will take care of us because He even cares about the birds and the grass of the field. Therefore we should not let the cares of the world enter our heart. We should entrust these to God. As for the

deceitfulness of riches, the Bible warns that "The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil" (1 Tim 6:10). Regarding the desires for other things, there is a wide range of "other things" to desire in this world. It could be anything. Fashion and popularity would fit in this category. The desire for entertainment, in all of its many forms, would be included too. Unlike previous generations, today most people in the world have access to the internet, which instantly provides us with games, sports, movies, social media, and almost anything we could want. These things aren't evil, but we should take care not to let our hearts be enticed by any of them. We are supposed to set our hearts entirely on God, and not anything this world offers.

In Heaven, God will let us enjoy many of His delights, but we will never use them in a selfish way. We will always be giving *God* all the glory for His goodness and for the pleasures He gives us. We won't ever set our heart on them. If God ever takes them away, it won't make us angry because we never loved those pleasures anyway. We only loved Him. I realize that is a high bar to achieve. Don't feel bad for not being there. I want you to be aware that love is the goal, though.

Let us quickly look at the seed that was sown on good ground.

> Mark 4:20 — "But these are the ones sown on good ground, those who hear the word, accept it, and bear fruit: some thirtyfold, some sixty, and some a hundred."

The good ground does not allow itself to get choked with the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things. They have surrendered those things to God. These people accept the word of the gospel, and that is the only thing that matters to them.

Matthew 13 has seven parables of Jesus in it. The parable of the four types of soil is one of the parables. To emphasize that Jesus expects your total surrender, He gives two other parables with that message:

> Matthew 13:44 — "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells *all* that he has and buys that field."

The other parable is,

> Matthew 13:45-46 — "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold *all* that he had and bought it."

Note how in both parables the person sold all, everything they had, to gain something that was worth even more.

I don't think these parables are about salvation. Paul the Apostle went about "Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Acts 20:21. I believe those are the two conditions to be saved: repentance toward God and faith in Jesus Christ. But still, to live in the fullness of the New Covenant that Jesus purchased for us, we have to work with the Holy Spirit in cleansing our hearts from the world so they can be completely set on God.

There was a wealthy church in Laodicea that Jesus addressed. Their riches caused them to be lukewarm toward Jesus. Jesus spoke to them firmly, but He also gave them some encouragement.

> Revelation 3:17-19 — "Because you say, 'I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing'—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed; and anoint your eyes with eye salve, that you may see. As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent."

"As many as I love." Be encouraged. You may not be where you are supposed to yet, as the Laodiceans weren't. Jesus wasn't condemning them. He was pointing them to Himself. He said, "I counsel you to buy *from Me* gold, white garments, and eyesalve." They thought riches would satisfy them, but true riches are spiritual riches. They are only found in Christ. Jesus loved these people. He cherished them, and He also loves and cherishes you. Let us turn to Him to find that love and to find what we are truly looking for.

> Isaiah 55:1-2 — "Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat. Yes, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend money for what is not bread, and your wages for what does not satisfy? Listen carefully to Me, and eat what is good, and let your soul delight itself in abundance."

Obedience

Loving the Lord means loving Him with all of your heart. But it also means obeying Him.

> John 14:21 — "He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me…"

He also said,

> John 14:15 — "If you love Me, keep My commandments."

I believe "My commandments" refers to the teaching He gave to His disciples. Much of it is found in Matthew 5-7. As part of the New Covenant, these things should already be inside of your hearts by the Holy Spirit. Jesus confirms that here.

> John 14:26 — "But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you."

Our obedience to the Lord is connected to our loving Him. So we should take care that we try to obey Him.

Sometimes, though, the Holy Spirit puts things on our hearts. These things may not be a clearly defined commandment in the Scripture, but they still may be a prompting from Him.

> Philippians 2:13 — for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure.

We should not allow ourselves to be tormented inside, trying to discern whether any little thought in our head is from God or from us. But if we think something is from God, we should obey it.
It can be very costly in this world to take steps of obedience.
I know there is disagreement in the Christian world about whether the Holy Spirit would prompt a Christian to do things outside of the Bible, like calling a relative you haven't spoken to in years.

What often holds us back from obeying Him is a fear of making mistakes. Or we fear that we might say something that makes us look foolish, or something that would even make God look foolish. But God has said that He will never leave us nor forsake us (Heb 13:5). That means, even if we do get something wrong, and even if that causes others to forsake us, God will still love us and not forsake us. We need to understand this if we are to take bold steps for God. If we don't see God as being very good to us, we may become like the servant in the next parable who was given one talent.

> Matthew 25:24-25 — "Then he who had received the one talent came and said, 'Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed. And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.'"

That servant had a bad view of his master, and this caused him to be too afraid to take a risk. If he had believed that his master was loving,

forgiving, and would never forsake him, he would have had the courage to try putting his talent to use somehow. This servant was commanded earlier by his master: "Do business until I come" (vs. 13). Now the master did not give him a specific commandment about *how* to trade and make money. That would be the responsibility of the servant. We ourselves also are not often told specifically how to accomplish God's work. God entrusts us with that responsibility. We need to step out in faith that God will help us as we try. Perhaps we will fail in our first few attempts. But we must still keep trying. This fearful servant was too afraid to take any steps of faith, and this made him miss the master's will.

You will have to take a risk acting on what God *may* have put in your heart. Maybe it *is* just your own self that feels something needs to get done. Or, maybe it was God who put that feeling in you. You will never be completely sure if it was God. Maybe you feel like trying something that has never been done before. That is okay. Don't let that hold you back. God often commanded things in the Bible that had never been done before. They didn't know with certainty how God would work things out. That is what makes it faith. Those who did great things in the Bible were commended for their faith that God would be with them as they stepped out in obedience. Sometimes they made mistakes or even committed sins, but God remained faithful to help them. It is better to try obeying Him and get it wrong, than to not try at all.

And now, if I may preach a little…
Go all the way with God. Be zealous! Be bold for Him! Even if you make many mistakes in your boldness, He won't leave you. Give Him all your time. Pursue Him with everything! Leave the world. It has nothing for you. It can only tantalize your flesh, but it can't help your spirit. God went to great lengths to make it possible for you to love Him all of the way. He so loved you that He came down from Heaven, was rejected, was marred more than any man, hung on a

cross, was mocked by the crowd, abandoned by His friends, and died among the criminals for you. Will you not love Him back?

Several of the ten commandments show God's desire that we would love Him with all the heart. The very first commandment is,

> Exodus 20:3 — "You shall have no other gods before Me."

We cannot love the Lord with all the heart if we have any gods before Him. The second commandment is also about loving God. We looked at it earlier in this chapter.

> Exodus 20:4-6 — "You shall not make for yourself a carved image—any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them nor serve them. For I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate Me, but showing mercy to thousands, to those who love Me and keep My commandments."

Here is the last of the ten commandments. It also is about loving God with all your heart.

> Exodus 20:17 — "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, nor his male servant, nor his female servant, nor his ox, nor his donkey, nor anything that is your neighbor's."

We also saw earlier how coveting is idolatry (Col 3:5, Eph 5:5). You are not loving God with all your heart if you covet the things of the world.

Here is a short summary of reasons to believe that God wants us to love Him with all the heart.

- Many wars and battles occurred because of idolatry.
- The command to love God is in the book of Deuteronomy 11 times.

- The New Covenant was created for the reason of making it possible to love God.
- Loving God is the first commandment.
- It is the second commandment.
- It is the last commandment.
- It is the greatest commandment.

Chapter 8
Benefit 3: Crucified to the Flesh

In an earlier chapter we looked at Deuteronomy and saw how God told Moses that the Israelites will go into exile for their sins. But God also said that He would make them return to their land.

> Deuteronomy 30:5 — "Then the LORD your God will bring you to the land which your fathers possessed, and you shall possess it. He will prosper you and multiply you more than your fathers."

Then God said He would do something after they return. Here is the next verse.

> Deuteronomy 30:6 — "And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live."

I believe that this circumcision of the heart is the same thing Jeremiah prophesied would happen in the New Covenant.

> Jeremiah 31:33 — "But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts..."

With God's law in our very minds and on our very hearts, we will finally have power to overcome sin in the New Covenant.

Ever since Adam and Eve ate from the tree, we have been spiritually dead in our sins. We have not been able to walk in God's statutes and keep His judgments. Nor have we been able to love God with all our heart. It is human nature to covet the things of the world. The law can command us to love God with all our heart, but until God circumcises it in the New Covenant, it will be unable to do so. Our flesh is still

dead in sins even if it tries to keep the law. This makes the law very weak in producing any lasting change.

> Romans 8:3 — For what the law could not do in that *it was weak through the flesh*…

In Romans 7, Paul discovered his own personal weakness in keeping the law.

> Romans 7:7-8 — … I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, "You shall not covet." But sin, taking opportunity by the commandment, produced in me all manner of evil desire…

In the previous chapter, I talked about how God desires us to love Him with all the heart. It should be the desire of every Christian that our heart would be fully set on Him. I'm afraid many Christians take no concern for whether they are keeping the great commandment. They may be believers, but many of them have a heart that is set on the things of the world. Here, though, in Romans 7, there definitely is something in Paul that wants to love God all the way, but he is struggling to do it.

> Romans 7:18 — For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells; for to will is present with me, but how to perform what is good I do not find.

Paul has a heart to love God. But his flesh is greatly resisting that. Even after a person gets saved and born again, they still have a sinful flesh that opposes them.

The rest of Romans 7 describes Paul's efforts to be good, but failing to find the power within him. He uses the word "I" 26 times from verse 13 through verse 25. Paul, with all the efforts of his flesh, could not defeat coveting. He could not keep the law on his own. He had a heart that was right, but he also found a lot of desires in himself that were sin. Many Christians, if they are honest, will admit to being in such a place. I believe this happens to people who try to walk the

Christian life in their own strength, apart from abiding in Jesus. That is what the law of Moses does. It tells *you* to do this or that. But your flesh had no power to defeat sin before you were saved, nor does it have that power after you were saved. Many Christians need to come to the end of themselves, as Paul did at the end of Romans 7. He said,

> Romans 7:24 — O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

And then he answers it in the next verse.

> Romans 7:25 — I thank God—through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, with the mind I myself serve the law of God, but with the flesh the law of sin.

The next chapter, Romans 8, makes a large distinction between walking in human strength (the flesh) and walking in Christ's strength (the Spirit). The flesh will never be rid of sin. So if someone walks their life in their own strength, without abiding in Jesus, they will not be able to defeat sin. I believe that is what Paul is saying in the next passage.

> Romans 8:5-6 ASV — For they that are after the flesh mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit the things of the Spirit. For the mind of the flesh is death; but the mind of the Spirit is life and peace.

I interpret that as saying, if you try to be good in the power of your own strength (your flesh), you will find your mind having thoughts of the flesh (which are sin). But, if you humbly stay close to Jesus, worshiping Him and keeping your eyes on Him (which is being after the Spirit), then the Holy Spirit will produce life and peace in you. There are two ways to be good: One is through rules and effort. The other is through the Holy Spirit changing us as we believe and follow Jesus.

I want to show you another verse that says the same thing in totally different words.

> Romans 7:4 — Therefore, my brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another—to Him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God.

Instead of becoming good by trying to keep the law, written on stone, we walk by our union with the Lord, who lives in our very heart. We believe He loved us and died for our sins, and we love Him back. We acknowledge Him in all things, and we do all things to Him.

> Colossians 3:23-24 — And whatever you do, do it heartily, as to the Lord and not to men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance; for you serve the Lord Christ.

Take care not to allow rules, people's expectations, or anything else to distract you from your own fellowship with the living Christ.

> 2 Corinthians 11:3 NASB20 — But I am afraid that, as the serpent deceived Eve by his trickery, your minds will be led astray from sincere and pure devotion to Christ.

I don't believe it is necessary to preach a mixture of Jesus plus other things like rules, effort, and philosophy. It is enough to believe Jesus, to know Him, to love Him, and to humbly walk with Him. That is the way to be made complete.

> Colossians 2:8-10 — Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in Him, who is the head of all principality and power.

Circumcised by Christ

A large hindrance that stops us from enjoying our union with the Lord is our flesh, which is dead in trespasses and sins. God created a solution for the problem of sin long ago. God's solution for sin was not to repeatedly wash sin out of the flesh. Flesh will never be rid of sin. God's solution was to *cut the flesh off*. That is what happens in circumcision. The foreskin of a male child doesn't get repeatedly cleaned. It gets cut off. It still exists, but the child is dead to it.

God commanded all of the male children in Israel to be circumcised (Lev 12:3). That was a symbol of one day becoming circumcised in the heart. It is true that there were a few commands in the Old Testament for them to circumcise their heart (Deut 10:6 and Jer 4:4), but nowhere does it say that they actually succeeded in doing that. Circumcision of the heart would have to be something that *God* performs. That is what He does in the New Covenant.

> Romans 2:29 — … Circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.

With a circumcised heart, there is still a sinful flesh that wars against us with temptation. But we also have a heart that is dead to all of that sin, and if we are walking closely with Christ, we can put sin to death wherever we see it in our lives.

We never could die to our sins before Jesus came and died for us. It wasn't even the preaching of Jesus that changed His disciples. It was the death and resurrection of Jesus that changed them. After three years of listening to the preaching of Jesus, His disciples forsook Him when He was arrested. But after Jesus died and rose again, He started the New Covenant, under which Jesus came to live in their hearts, and then they became different people.

The Bible says that we can only die to sin because Christ died, and we died with Him.

> Romans 6:6-7 — knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin. For he who has died has been freed from sin.

We have been crucified with Christ. And in so doing, our sins have been crucified also. If we remain in the Spirit, abiding in Christ, and if we stay away from the flesh, then we will be dead to sin.

Circumcision is no longer commanded by God like it was in the Old Testament. The true circumcision, of the heart, happens in the New Testament. God places the Holy Spirit in our hearts when we are saved, and the goal is for our entire lives to be surrendered to Him. In the New Testament, instead of circumcision, we practice baptism. When a person is baptized they go under water and symbolically they die, just as Christ died. Then the person is raised up out of water and symbolically they are raised to new life by the Holy Spirit, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit. The person's *entire* old man goes under water and dies. When it is raised up out of water, the only life in them now that is keeping them alive is *entirely* the Holy Spirit. The person goes from having none of the Holy Spirit to having life *only* in the Holy Spirit. That is the transformation we should be continually striving toward as Christians.

Here is a passage that connects circumcision to baptism.

> Colossians 2:11-13 — In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses.

The Bible says that we are:

- Crucified with Christ
- Baptized into Christ's death
- Circumcised with the circumcision made without hands

In each of these there is a death that happens to us. Christ was crucified, and we are "in Him", and so we were crucified when Christ was crucified. Christ was buried in a tomb, and in baptism we are buried in a watery grave. In circumcision, the flesh of the foreskin gets cut off and dies.

Paul says that because we died, we are to put to death whatever belongs to the flesh.

> Colossians 3:3, 5 — For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. ... Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry.

That list has covetousness again, which was the same thing Paul was struggling with in Romans 7. Eventually, through Christ, he gained the victory over coveting. He was able to say,

> Acts 20:33 — "I have coveted no one's silver or gold or apparel."

Jesus said, "Apart from Me, you can do nothing." We must continue to humbly abide in Jesus if we are to continue to have victory over sin. The flesh and the Spirit are always against each other. The next verse is written to us Christians. It is a warning that we are not supposed to just do whatever things we want to do because our flesh will still always want to sin.

> Galatians 5:17 NIV — For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want.

Earlier we looked at how we died with Christ. We were crucified with Him and our flesh with its sins died too. Yet the Bible tells us in many places to crucify the flesh.

> Galatians 5:24 — And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

The verb "crucified" in that verse is a verb in the "active" tense (not passive tense). The active tense means the subject of the sentence performs the action. In other words, "those who are Christ's" are the ones who crucify the flesh. That is *our* job. *We* need to take care to always be putting to death the deeds of the flesh. If we humbly deny ourselves, keep our eyes on Jesus, trust Him, love Him, and worship Him, then sin will lose its power over us as the Holy Spirit transforms us into His image. But if you stop beholding Jesus, if you stop abiding in Him, then you are operating in the flesh, and will have struggles with sin. That is how corrupt flesh is apart from Jesus. We need the Holy Spirit moment by moment to remain crucified to the flesh. That is why Paul wrote,

> Galatians 5:16 — I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lust of the flesh.

Passages to Support This

The previous section explains how death to your entire self is the way to overcome sin. We don't just put sin to death. We need to put everything to death. Your entire old self is to be crucified, and then all of its sins will die with it. That might be a new doctrine for many of you, so we will look at that more closely here. I believe it is of great importance to understand.

The Christian life is not one that you "manage." If we die with Christ, we die to "managing" our lives. The Christian life is lived from Christ living in our hearts. We are called to be "one spirit with Him (1 Cor

6:17)," and if we are, then Christ in us will guide and run our lives. Some people are under the impression that they just need to stop doing a few things and maybe start doing a few things, and then they will be great Christians. Sometimes there *are* practical steps we need to take in our obedience to God. But those steps are not an end in themselves. They should only be helping us to cut out the flesh so that everything in our lives will be submitted to the Holy Spirit. Then, Jesus will be Lord of all of our lives.

Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, and it has many practical steps in it. But the Corinthians were a fleshly people.

> 1 Corinthians 3:1-3 ESV — But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?

Yet, even in the practical steps he gives them, he makes it about the Lord. If the Corinthians get their life right towards Him, then their actions will be better. For example, when they were boasting of what leader they followed, Paul wrote, "Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth." If they see that it is God, and not a leader, who changes people, they won't boast in their leaders. Paul continues in his letter not only to point out their wrong behavior—he also points them to the Lord, so that when they look to Him in those areas of life, they will be led less by the flesh and more by the Spirit.

Here are some passages to support the idea that we ought to be dead to our whole self:

> Romans 6:6 — Knowing this, that our old man was crucified with Him…

Not just our sins were crucified, but the person we were before getting saved, was crucified.

> Romans 6:6 — …That the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.

Not just that sin might be done away with, but that the body might be done away with, and its sins with it.

> Romans 6:7 — For he who has died has been freed from sin.

Not just the person whose sins have died, but the person who themself has died, is free from sin.

> Romans 7:24 — O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?

Not, "Who will deliver me from death", but "Who will deliver me from this *body* of death."

> Romans 8:10 — And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

If Christ is in you, then your body, your flesh, is *still* dead in trespasses and sins, but your spirit now has life by the Holy Spirit.

> Galatians 2:20 — "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me…"

Not just Paul's sins have been crucified, but Paul himself has been crucified, so much so that he no longer runs his own life. He keeps a close union with Christ, and Christ is the One who runs Paul's life.

> Galatians 5:24 — And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

We crucify not just our passions and desires, but our whole flesh, along with its passions and desires.

> Galatians 6:14 — But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

Paul is crucified, not just to sin, but to everything.

> 2 Timothy 2:11 — This is a faithful saying: For if we died with Him, we shall also live with Him.

Not just our sins died with Him, but we ourselves died with Him.

> Ephesians 4:22 — That you put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts.

Put off, not just the deceitful lusts, but put off the entire old man, which is corrupt with deceitful lusts.

> Colossians 2:11 — In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.

You were circumcised by putting off, not just the sins of the flesh, but the *body* of the sins of the flesh.

> Colossians 3:3 — For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.

Not just your sins died, but you yourself died.

> Colossians 3:9 — Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds.

You have put off, not just the deeds of the old man, but the entire old man, including his deeds.

Finally, here are the words of Jesus Himself.

> Matthew 10:39 — "He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for My sake will find it."

Not, “he who loses his sins for My sake,” but “he who loses his life for My sake” will find it.

> Matthew 16:24 — Then Jesus said to His disciples, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.”

Not, “If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny his sins,” but “let him deny himself.”

> John 12:25 — “He who loves his life will lose it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

Not “he who hates his sins in this world,” but “he who hates his life in this world.” I don’t think Jesus wants us to literally hate our life. Joy *is* a fruit of the Spirit. Nevertheless, let us leave the world behind us because

> Hebrews 13:14-15 — …Here we have no continuing city, but we seek the one to come. Therefore by Him let us continually offer the sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to His name.

Dying to the flesh is not a one time thing. We must lay aside our desires every day.

> 1 Corinthians 9:26-27 — Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.

The tenses in the verbs there are present (not past). He doesn’t just fight, discipline, or bring into subjection one time and then he’s done with it. No. He is *continually* doing those.

Some Encouragement

I know the thought of dying to yourself seems pretty challenging. Loving God with all the heart may also seem difficult. I am not here to shame anyone. You don't need to feel guilty for not being perfect yet. God sees you "in Christ." You are the bride of Christ. You are kept in peace with God by grace. If you are feeling condemned by seeing your shortcomings, you are still living under the Old Covenant, which Paul calls the ministry of condemnation.

> 2 Corinthians 3:9 — For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory.

The New Covenant is the ministry of righteousness. The blood that Christ shed for you declares that your condemnation has been paid, and that you will not be condemned for your sins.

Paul himself had not arrived yet at where God wanted him either.

> Philippians 3:12-13 — Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected… Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended…

But Paul didn't walk around saying "woe is me." He knew he was a child of God.

It isn't *your* righteousness that gets you into Heaven. It's *Christ's* righteousness that He gives you by believing that He loved you and died for you. Your sins may make you feel very ungodly and that you could never trust a Holy God to forgive (justify) you. But those feelings are a lie.

> Romans 4:5 — But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.

And,

> Romans 8:33 — Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

God is not the one who brings a charge against you. God is the one Who justifies you.

In God's love, He keeps you under grace. You are not under the law with its condemnation. Only, you should abide in that love and allow the goodness of God to move you to resist sin's dominion over you.

> Romans 6:14 — For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace.

If you persist in your sin, God may bring discipline to your life. But even if you are being disciplined, God is treating you as His son (or daughter).

> Hebrews 12:5-6 — And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not despise the chastening of the LORD, Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; For whom the LORD loves He chastens, And scourges every son whom He receives."

Paul had to bring some rebuke and discipline to the church at Corinth. They were the most sinful church in the New Testament. Yet hear the love that Paul has for them.

> 2 Corinthians 7:3 — I do not say this to condemn; for I have said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together.

And hear his love in the next verse too.

> 2 Corinthians 12:15 — And I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved.

Your sins don't stop Him from loving you. They may hinder your closeness to Him, but they won't hinder His love for you. Jesus won't give up on you, even in your struggle against sin. His love is everlasting. If you have wandered away from Him, confess it to Him, humble yourself before Him, take your thoughts and actions captive, try not to stray again, and focus your thoughts on Him. If you sin again, He always remains forgiving, always. Jesus is your Great High

Priest. The role of the High Priest is never to accuse anyone, but to intercede for them. Jesus was tempted in every way that we are, and for this He can sympathize with our weaknesses, and we can boldly come before Him and expect Him to have grace on us.

> Hebrews 4:15-16 — For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

God Works by Humility

By this point you may be saying, "All the doctrine in this book is very humbling." I would agree with that: The doctrine of inheriting a sinful nature from Adam is humbling. Because of Adam's disobedience, we are all hopelessly dead in trespasses and sins. Nothing humanity has tried was able to change that. Our conscience couldn't change it. The law of Moses couldn't change it. The twelve judges of Israel couldn't change it. Nor could any of the kings of Israel or Judah change it. Only the death and resurrection of Jesus changed our dead spirits by making them alive again.

The doctrine of being saved by grace through faith also humbles us. We are not saved *by* good works, but *for* good works. God is not looking for us to accomplish great things for the purpose of earning a place in Heaven. We would boast if that were the case. Jesus already earned us a place in Heaven. Now we can do our good works from thankfulness, humility, and rest because the needful matter of our salvation does not depend on our works.

> Ephesians 2:8-10 — For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His

> workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.

Paul says again in Romans,

> Romans 3:27-28 — Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law? Of works? No, but by the law of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

If we put ourselves under the law of Moses, that is a great hindrance to humility. Under the law, *we* are responsible for our own righteousness. *We* are responsible to clean up our behaviour. It all depends on *us*. This leads to fear and pride.

Placing our faith in the blood of Christ, though, will humble us because we acknowledge that Jesus shed His blood for us by grace, out of His infinite love, apart from whether we deserve it. But the same blood also gives us boldness with God because it makes us His sons and daughters, fully acceptable to Him.

And while we are talking about becoming humble, the very attributes of God Himself should also humble us:

- God is all-knowing (Ps 147:5). There is nothing you could ever know or tell to God that God doesn't already know or could tell to you.
- God is the Creator of all (Ps 33:6). There is nothing you could ever create or give to God that God has not first created or given to you.
- God is all-powerful (Jer 32:17). There is nothing you could ever do for God that God could never do without you.

We should never think too highly of ourselves, as if we were the source of all goodness. Anything we know, create, or do is only possible because God gave us the ability to know, create, or do those things.

Not only does all of this doctrine bring us to humility, but the Bible is consistent that the way God works is also through humility. Here are some examples:

- In the parable of the Pharisee and tax collector, Jesus said that it was the tax collector who was justified because "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."
- Jesus was "in the form of God," but He "humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."
- King Manasseh was brought back after he "implored the LORD his God, and humbled himself greatly before the God of his fathers."
- When King Solomon was dedicating the temple, God said, "If My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven."
- James writes that for you to defeat your love of the world, you should "humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up."
- God allowed the Israelites to remain in the wilderness for 40 years "that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end."
- God told Moses that He will bring the exiles back to their land "if their uncircumcised hearts are humbled, and they accept their guilt."

Sometimes we wonder why God doesn't seem to be doing much in our spirit. We must humble ourselves before His greatness and holiness if we want Him to do a work within us.

> Isaiah 57:15 — For thus says the High and Lofty One who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: "I dwell in the high and holy place, with him who has a contrite and humble

> spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite ones."

Losing Self-sufficiency

Here we will look at another humbling doctrine, the need to lose self-sufficiency.

I believe the New Covenant is all the work of the Holy Spirit. None of it is flesh. Look again at everything that God says *He* will do in the New Covenant.

> Ezekiel 36:25-29 — "Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God. I will deliver you from all your uncleannesses..."

This is the opposite of the Old Covenant, where everything was "You shall do this" or "You shall not do that." It all depended on *you*. A big problem with the law is that it fostered an "I can do it" attitude. A person who believes they can do a task all on their own is self-sufficient. That might not seem so bad. If you were in a job interview, it's good to convey to the manager that you believe you are able to do the job without needing the assistance of another.

But the Kingdom of Heaven does not work like this world. There is no boasting in Heaven. God doesn't want us to do the work of His

Kingdom with a self-sufficient attitude. God wants us to trust in a loving Saviour, Jesus, and then the Spirit will make us sufficient to do His work.

> 2 Corinthians 3:4-6 — And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the New Covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

In the New Covenant, it is God who makes us sufficient to obey His commands. Here Paul says that it is also God who makes him sufficient to be a minister. Paul doesn't think he is smart enough or strong enough on his own to be a minister. He trusts God to help him and be his strength.

There were some people who looked at Paul on the outside and saw a normal human being, and they assumed that Paul walked in the power of his human strength like everyone else. But Paul laid down his human strength so he could walk in the mighty power (of the Spirit).

> 2 Corinthians 10:3-4 ASV — For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh (for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but mighty before God to the casting down of strongholds);

To walk in the mighty power of the Spirit, we need to cast down all our proud thoughts because these keep us from knowing God. We also take every thought captive. But it is not enough to merely exert control over our thoughts. Our thoughts are not to be "managed," but surrendered. We still hold them captive, but now to the obedience of Christ.

> 2 Corinthians 10:5 ASV — casting down imaginations, and every high thing that is exalted against the knowledge of God, and bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ;

Paul again tells us not just to avoid bad thoughts, but to *choose* to think good thoughts.

> Philippians 4:8 — Finally, brethren, whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy–meditate on these things.

God wants us depending on Him, not ourselves. God even allows hardship into our lives so that we will humbly look to Him to be our strength. This happened to Paul.

> 2 Corinthians 1:8-9 — For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even of life. Yes, we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves but in God who raises the dead,

A proud "I can do it" attitude is not how God's kingdom goes forth. Paul was in a situation that looked so bad that he says "we had the sentence of death in ourselves." There was no "I can do it" attitude in this awful situation he was facing. He thoroughly knew that he could *not* do it and that he needed God Himself to rescue him. If we see how much we really need God, we will lose our self-sufficiency and the pride that goes with it.

We don't like to talk about God using suffering as a means of helping us change, but sometimes that is one of His methods.

> 1 Peter 4:1-2 — Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin, that he no longer should live the rest of his time in the flesh for the lusts of men, but for the will of God.

God wants to bring His own people to a life that is fully dependent on the Holy Spirit and not our own human abilities. He may bring us into a "wilderness period" if that's what it takes to make us dependent on Him. There is a dying to ourselves and also a dependence upon God that God will bring about in the wilderness. It isn't comfortable, but God knows how to use it to bring about our good.

After the Israelites left Egypt in the days of Moses, God led them toward the Promised Land, which at the time was inhabited by Canaanites and other nations. Between Egypt and the Promised Land lies a wilderness area that they traveled through. When it came time for them to conquer the Canaanites with their walled cities and tall people, the Israelites became afraid and did not obey God. They tried appointing a leader and going back to Egypt, even though they had seen God bring ten miraculous plagues upon Egypt to deliver them out of there. God sentenced them to 40 years in the wilderness for their disobedience.

The 40 years in the wilderness were a time of many temptations, hardships, and dangerous situations they had to endure. It wasn't fun, but it humbled them. At the end of the 40 years, Moses wrote,

> Deuteronomy 8:2-3 — "And you shall remember that the LORD your God led you all the way these forty years in the wilderness, to humble you and test you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not. So He humbled you, allowed you to hunger, and fed you with manna which you did not know nor did your fathers know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone; but man lives by every word that proceeds from the mouth of the LORD."

A few verses later, he added,

> Deuteronomy 8:15-17 — "(God) led you through that great and terrible wilderness, in which were fiery serpents and scorpions and thirsty land where there was no water; who

> brought water for you out of the flinty rock; who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might humble you and that He might test you, to do you good in the end…"

When God sent the Israelites into the wilderness, He allowed them to hunger. They were forced to deny the flesh. They had to say "No" to their appetite because at times there was literally no food for them to feed their appetite. They were forced to humble themselves and say, "God is faithful. God will provide."

There was total unemployment in the wilderness. There wasn't any corporate ladder to climb, nor any chance of "making it big." Those are desires of the flesh. All of that was stripped away from them. It is humbling to go through that. On top of not having riches and security, now the people are exposed to the elements. They need food, water, and shelter. Every day becomes about survival. Will they trust in a loving God who will provide for them? God is their only option. If God doesn't provide manna, water, and shelter, they will die. In Egypt, they did not have to trust God to be their everything. But in the wilderness, they learned to do so. God became the only thing that mattered.

Sometimes they became angry and complained about their trials. They had not learned to depend on God yet. God didn't like their complaining, and He sometimes punished them for it. Besides complaining, God also dealt with other sins in the wilderness: The people tempted God on one occasion, and God sent fiery serpents among them. Another time, the people lusted for food to the point of weeping, and God sent quail to them, and it made them sick. Another time, foreign women came and seduced the men to commit fornication and idolatry, and God struck down 23,000 of them in one day. These are all sins of our humanity, our flesh, our fallen nature.

Eventually they learned not to walk by their human abilities, human wisdom, and human desires, but by faith in God's love and protection. They learned to continually depend on Him. That is what God wants from us too. The New Covenant is *God's* doing. God is faithful to do it in us, but we must stop walking by our own wisdom and by our own desires. Flesh must get out of the way. We need to crucify the flesh with its passions and desires. And we need to trust God's everlasting love and His power to do the work in us.

Chapter 9
Christ Lives the Christian Life in Us

The New Covenant is God's great provision to forgive our sins so that we will not suffer His wrath. It also promises a new heart that will allow us to love God with our whole being. There is also another provision. It says that we can all *know God.*

> Jeremiah 31:34 — "No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD…"

John writes that when Jesus came, He was the revelation of who the Father is.

> John 1:18 — No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

When Jesus came to Earth, His disciples had the great privilege of knowing the Son of God, and in so doing, to know God. It could be argued that when Jeremiah says "They shall all know Me," this is referring to knowing Jesus because by knowing Jesus, we know God.

Jesus even went on to say that to know Him is to know the Father.

> John 14:7 — "If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and from now on you know Him and have seen Him."

In an earlier chapter we looked at the next verse where humanity is compared to sheep that have all gone astray.

> Isaiah 53:6 — All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way…

Jesus agreed to be the Lamb of God that would take the punishment that we sheep deserve. But Jesus isn't only our Lamb, He is also our Shepherd. God said in the New Covenant that he would raise up (a son of) David, who will not only be their king, but will also be their shepherd.

> Ezekiel 37:24 — "David My servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd; they shall also walk in My judgments and observe My statutes, and do them."

Ezekiel also prophesied in chapter 34 that God would raise up a shepherd over His people.

> Ezekiel 34:23-24 — "I will establish one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them—My servant David. He shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and My servant David a prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken."

A shepherd will get to know each individual sheep that he has. Sheep aren't known for being smart. And they get dirty. It isn't the job of a king to be among the sheep. But King Jesus said He is also the Good Shepherd. He *does* get to know each individual sheep, and each individual sheep will get to know Him.

> John 10:14 — "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own."

Praying For Our Needs

We have the wonderful privilege of knowing Jesus in the New Covenant. But a privilege will only do you good if you make use of it. Prayer is one means of knowing Jesus deeper.

Prayer is supposed to be a time of worship and fellowship with the Lord, but it is also a time of lifting up our needs to Him, which I do want to briefly talk about here.

> Hebrews 11:6 — But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.

Sometimes in life we encounter circumstances that we truly need an answer about. For example, in the Old Testament there were enemy nations that gathered to attack Judah, and the king prayed to God for help or direction. Sometimes the king was very sick, and he prayed or sent to a prophet about the illness. We, also, encounter obstacles in life that are beyond our abilities to change, and where we need God to do something. God says above He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him. Like the kings, we also can pray in difficult circumstances, and we can have others pray for us too.

Sometimes we pray about a matter and see no difference. We may even think that God isn't interested in answering our prayer. The people in Isaiah's day were in that situation.

> Isaiah 58:3 — "'Why have we fasted,' they say, 'and You have not seen? Why have we afflicted our souls, and You take no notice?'"...

They were fasting, praying, and afflicting their souls, and it seemed God took no notice. You may read all of Isaiah 58 to see why God seemed silent. God certainly did care, but in short, there were two reasons why He wasn't answering. One, they were mistreating each other and not showing love for one another. And two, they were doing their own pleasures and they weren't truly desperate for Him. There may be other reasons why God doesn't answer prayer, but that is another matter.

We should also be consistent in praying. In Luke 18 Jesus gave a parable to teach us that we should always pray and not lose heart. In

this parable, there was a woman who continually came to an unjust judge, wanting justice from her adversary who wronged her. Eventually, the judge gave in to her request.

> Luke 18:6-8 — Then the Lord said, "Hear what the unjust judge said. And shall God not avenge His own elect who cry out day and night to Him, though He bears long with them? I tell you that He will avenge them speedily. Nevertheless, when the Son of Man comes, will He really find faith on the earth?"

I will also add that when you pray, believe that the blood of Christ gives you access to God. In the New Covenant, you can press in to God, and He won't despise you. There is no longer a thick veil separating you from God whereby you will die if you cross it. You are totally forgiven in His sight and made worthy to have your prayer heard on high. God honors faith. We should trust that the blood of Christ, which He shed in His love for us, really does atone for our sin.

Praying For Fellowship

Sometimes we have a desperate situation and it is right to pray much about it. In general, though, our prayer time should be more about fellowship with the Lord, and not about specific needs we have. God has called us to having fellowship with His Son, Jesus, the Lord.

> 1 Corinthians 1:9 — God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

As you are praying, humbling yourself before Him, worshiping Him, and entering into fellowship with Him, your spirit will be transformed. Jesus is "the rest" and "the refreshing" that God planned for us long ago (Isa 28:12). The Holy Spirit will bear fruit inside your spirit of:

> Galatians 5:22-23 — … love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

Abiding in Christ (through prayer and fellowship) is the only way for the Spirit to produce this fruit in us. Jesus said,

> John 15:5 — "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing."

Prayer is one aspect of staying close to Jesus. It should really be our whole lives that are surrendered to Him, and not just our prayer time. Here is how Jesus taught His disciples to pray.

> Matthew 6:9-13 — "In this manner, therefore, pray: Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen."

Look at the aspects of that.

- "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name." This is worship. Before we even make our requests known to God, we should acknowledge that God deserves all glory and praise.
- "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This is submission. Ultimately, we want God's kingdom to come to Earth, even more than whatever our prayer requests are.
- "Give us this day our daily bread." Here we finally pray for our needs, and we lift our requests to God.
- "And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors." We ought always to maintain a close walk with God. He is very forgiving, but we should confess to Him where we have

failed Him. Jesus also includes that we forgive others. God's forgiveness never stops, and in like manner, our forgiveness of others should never stop either.

- "And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." God knows the temptations we all face. We ought to turn to God when tempted. Through His strength we can overcome.
- "For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen." Again, this is worship. The prayer begins and ends with giving glory to God.

Do you see the closeness that we can have to God as we pray? Of the six points, two were worship, one was about God's Kingdom, two were about our obedience to Him, and only one was about our physical needs. It's worth noting that worship is included at the beginning and end of the prayer. A large part of praying should be worship.

> Philippians 4:4-6 — Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.
>
> Ephesians 5:20 — giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.
>
> 2 Corinthians 6:10 — as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing…
>
> 1 Thessalonians 5:16 — Rejoice always.

We worship God for His goodness and for His love. It is very important to believe God's love for us: If we continue to abide in God's love, we abide in God.

> 1 John 4:16 — And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

Prayer was an important part of the apostles. When a complaint arose to them that some of the widows weren't being treated fairly, they delegated this task to seven others. Then the apostles said,

> Acts 6:4 — "but we will give ourselves *continually* to prayer and to the ministry of the word."

They were devoted to prayer and to preaching continually.

Luke writes about Jesus,

> Luke 5:16 — So He Himself *often* withdrew into the wilderness and prayed.

Jesus Himself found it necessary to pray often.

When Paul wrote to the married couples in Corinth, he said that they should not deprive each other, except for fasting and prayer.

> 1 Corinthians 7:5 — Do not deprive one another except with consent for a time, that you may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again so that Satan does not tempt you because of your lack of self-control.

Paul expected them to fast and pray often.

I am not able to tell you how long you should pray. Some of the great evangelists of the past centuries had a deep prayer life. I've heard of many of them that prayed between one to five hours a day. I think it is good to set aside something, even if only a few minutes, each day, to pray.

I once listened to a minister who said it was possible to live a life of constant communication with the Lord. He gave three verses about praying always:

> 1 Thessalonians 5:17 — pray without ceasing.
>
> Luke 18:1 — Then He spoke a parable to them, that men always ought to pray and not lose heart.

> Ephesians 6:18 — praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, being watchful to this end with all perseverance and supplication for all the saints.

I, myself, am not at that stage, but some famous ministers of the past said that they lived this way.

The Bible says that all Christians have the Holy Spirit in them, and in that sense, they all do know God. But, we are also to *grow* in our knowledge of Him. Among the reasons God raised up spiritual leaders in the church, we read,

> Ephesians 4:13 — till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the *knowledge of the Son of God*, to a perfect man…

Prayer is one way for us to grow in our knowledge of the Son of God.

It must have been very important to the apostle Peter that we grow in our knowledge of Christ because the last thing he writes in his second epistle is,

> 2 Peter 3:18 — but grow in the grace and *knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ*. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen.

The first three days of Paul after he met Jesus were spent entirely in prayer. I believe he was becoming emptied of himself, of his old ways, of life under the law, and he was trying to get to know Jesus deeply. Knowing Jesus deeply was Paul's great longing in life.

> Philippians 3:7-8 — But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ

Paul didn't just talk about losing all things for Christ. He actually followed through with it and lost everything so that he would have nothing in his life that competed with knowing Christ.

> Philippians 3:9 — and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;

Paul used to be a Pharisee. They were the strictest observers of the law. He used to delight in the thought that his works of the law gave him merit before God. But now, he looks to the cross as what gives him merit before God. Paul no longer has any boasting in himself, as he once did when he was a Pharisee. He is now consumed with Jesus and with knowing Him.

> Philippians 3:10 — that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death.

Jesus is Our Everything

In the New Covenant, Jesus is supposed to become everything to us. This is different from the law of Moses, where your concern was your performance. In the gospel of John, Jesus made eight "I Am" statements that tell us something of who Jesus is to be to us. I included two others also for a total of ten. You can personally know Jesus in these ways.

- I am the bread of life: (John 6:35, 41, 48, 51, 53). He is manna from Heaven that we feed on every day. We should come to Him often for spiritual nourishment. We have no life apart from Him.
- I am the light of the world: (John 8:12; 9:5). All of us are born in spiritual darkness. Jesus is the Light that drives out the sin and darkness in our lives.
- I am the door: (John 10:7). All who go through Jesus will find what truly delights the soul (Isa 55:1-2).

- I am the good shepherd: (John 10:11, 14). Jesus loved the world all the way and died for its sins, as a good shepherd will die for his sheep.
- I am the resurrection and the life: (John 11:25). Jesus will resurrect us at the end of the world. He will also resurrect our dead spirits the moment we first believe on Him.
- I am the way, the truth, and the life: (John 14:6). He is the way because no man comes to the Father but by the sacrifice of Jesus. He is the Truth because every word He speaks is from God. He is the Life because in Him alone is spiritual life.
- I am the true vine: (John 15:1, 5). If we continually abide in His love and obey His commands, He will bear much fruit in us.
- Before Abraham was, I AM: (John 8:58). God said His Name is "I Am that I Am." By using God's Name, Jesus is saying that He is God. It is good and right to worship Jesus.
- I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last: (Rev 1:11). Jesus exists before and after all things. He is the Creator of all things. He is the ultimate purpose of all things.
- I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star: (Rev 22:16). David was "the sweet psalmist of Israel" who valiantly fought many battles for his people. The grace and love of Christ shine even far greater than David and that of the sun (Matt 17:2, Acts 26:13)

From those ten statements, I believe that Jesus taught that *He is the one you should turn to, to find strength in your spiritual life.* Sometimes we try to achieve a good virtue through self-effort. But without knowing it, we are putting your eyes right back on ourselves to find the strength to achieve that virtue. If we put our eyes on Christ, though, if we believe His love and abide in Him, then His life will flow out from us. People will see Jesus and not our human efforts.

Jesus wants to be everything for us, but this can only happen if we keep turning away from other things and turn only to Him. Paul wrote that Christ is to be our life.

> Colossians 3:4 — When Christ *who is our life* appears…

And in a similar statement,

> Philippians 1:21 — For to me, *to live is Christ*, and to die is gain.

For Jesus to truly occupy our life to the point where He *is* our life, we will have to empty our lives and hearts of things that aren't Him. He paid a great price in His love to redeem us. Will we also pay a great price and empty our hearts and minds for Jesus alone to reside there?

We never were supposed to live for ourselves anyway. Everything we do is supposed to be done for the Lord.

> Romans 14:7-9 — For none of us lives to himself, and no one dies to himself. For if we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and rose and lived again, that He might be Lord of both the dead and the living.

Christ Lives in us Through The Holy Spirit

Shortly after Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt, God audibly spoke the ten commandments to them from Mount Sinai. The people trembled and asked Moses alone to ascend Mount Sinai so that he could hear God on their behalf. When he went up the mountain, he neither ate nor drank anything for forty days as he was in the presence of God. I think that was a way of Moses emptying himself and his heart of everything that isn't God so that God could be everything to him. Moses also talked (had fellowship) with God in those forty days. Moses did not know it, but his closeness to God transformed him. When he came down from the mountain, the skin on his face was

shining, even to the point where Aaron and the others were afraid to come near him. Moses put a veil on his face when they saw that his face was shining. Any time after that, when Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would take the veil off, and if his face was shining before the people, he would put it on.

In the New Covenant, we look to Jesus. We believe Him. We behold Him. We honor Him. We glorify Him. We don't put a veil on our face, even as Moses didn't put on a veil when he was in the presence of the Lord. Having no veil on our face means we choose to be open and draw near to the One we are with. There was a veil that protected people from the Holy of Holies, lest they get close to God and die. Moses took the veil off so he could draw close to God. Jesus destroyed the veil into the Holy of Holies so we can draw close to Him also. Even as Moses was transformed by being in the presence of God, so the Holy Spirit transforms us by being in the presence of Jesus and beholding Him.

> 2 Corinthians 3:18 — But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

We read much in the book of Acts about the Holy Spirit. And with good reason. It is the Holy Spirit who does the work in our hearts in the New Covenant.

> Ezekiel 36:26-27 — "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them."

The Holy Spirit was not poured out on God's people before Jesus died. But after Jesus died and rose again, the New Covenant took effect, and with it, the Holy Spirit now came to live in the hearts of

God's people. This is when the book of Acts takes place—after Jesus rose and the Holy Spirit now coming on God's people.

The first martyr in Acts was Stephen, a man "full of faith and the Holy Spirit." Since he was full of the Holy Spirit, he was like Jesus. Some council members rose up to dispute with him, but they did not win.

> Acts 6:10 — And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke.

After he preached to the council, the words spoken by the Spirit greatly convicted them.

> Acts 7:54 — When they heard these things *they were cut to the heart*, and they gnashed at him with their teeth.

That is what happened when Jesus (who always had the Holy Spirit remaining on Him) spoke. Some Sadducees were gathered together to ask Jesus questions, and after Jesus answered them, their reaction was,

> Matthew 22:33 — And when the multitudes heard this, they were *astonished* at His teaching.

Later, the Pharisees tried to entangle Jesus in His words, and they also were not able to answer Him back.

> Matthew 22:46 — And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor from that day on did anyone dare question Him anymore.

As with Stephen, the Sadducees and Pharisees could not resist the Holy Spirit by which Jesus spoke. These were not the words of men speaking from the best of their intellect, they were words straight from the Spirit of God Himself. Being able to speak words from the Holy Spirit just like Jesus did, is a benefit of the New Covenant.

> Isaiah 59:21 — "As for Me," says the LORD, "this is My covenant with them: My Spirit who is upon you, and My words which I have put in your mouth, shall not depart from

> your mouth, nor from the mouth of your descendants, nor from the mouth of your descendants' descendants," says the LORD, "from this time and forevermore."

We should keep our temple (our heart) clean. This is where the Holy Spirit abides. This is where Jesus wants to rule as king. God doesn't want sin or idols in His temple. I believe when you speak, it isn't the words themselves that will convict the listener. It is the Holy Spirit who convicts the listener, using the person whose heart and words are yielded to Him.

> 1 Corinthians 4:19-20 — But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power.

That is why it is important to have an interior life that is clean. It is not our intellect and human abilities that will change people. God grows His Kingdom through His servants who believe Jesus, love Him, and are yielded to the Holy Spirit. God will grant the words of these people to come in power.

That is the same principle in the next passage.

> 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 — I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.

Paul and Apollos were nothing special in themselves. They were men who loved and obeyed God, and *God* was the One who used their obedience to win souls.

At the end of the gospels, the apostles all fled when Jesus was arrested. Later, at the end of Acts 5, the apostles themselves were arrested. But there is a difference. Now they have the Holy Spirit abiding in them. What difference did that make? Instead of running away, the apostles testified *boldly* before a council. Then they were *beaten*. Then they left the council *rejoicing*.

> Acts 5:41 — So they departed from the presence of the council, *rejoicing* that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.

They loved the Lord so much and knew Him so deeply, that now, instead of fearing persecution, they rejoiced because of it. That is a great change. It was brought about by the Holy Spirit.

The life of Paul also bears witness to the power of the Holy Spirit. If Christ had not ascended to Heaven, then He would not have poured out the Holy Spirit upon Paul. Paul was the greatest of the apostles. Yet, he had not spent three years with Jesus as the other apostles had. It was entirely the Holy Spirit who transformed Paul into the great apostle.

God's grace upon him was so great that he changed his name from Saul to Paul. Paul went from being zealous for the law of Moses to being full of grace. He went from persecuting the church of Christ to greatly expanding the church of Christ. The Holy Spirit wrought this great change inside of him. You might think that Paul's background of persecuting the church would disqualify him from ever being used for God's kingdom, but it doesn't. The blood of Christ is powerful enough to completely forgive even the worst sinners, and the Holy Spirit is powerful enough to transform them into great servants of God. Paul would go on to write,

> 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 — I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.
>
> 1 Corinthians 15:10 — But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.
>
> 2 Corinthians 12:11 — I have become a fool in boasting; you have compelled me. For I ought to have been commended by

you; for in nothing was I behind the most eminent apostles, though I am nothing.

Conclusion

Chapter 10
My Testimony

My name is Matthew. I have written the book that you have read so far. This chapter is a testimony of God helping me at the lowest point of my life. This may help someone who feels completely forsaken by God. I was certainly in such a place. I describe everything that led up to my life becoming so miserable, and how God used one lady at church to give me truth that helped turn things around. Then I will share how my testimony relates to the themes of this book.

I make myself very vulnerable here. I share everything, even at the risk of greatly embarrassing myself. Some of this story is awkward and bizarre, some of it is disgusting, and some of it may even be scary. But in the end, it works out for good.

Let us begin. It was December of the year 2012. I was living in the state of Maryland. I was reading news reports of the stomach flu that was spreading around the country and especially on the East Coast where I lived. It looked like a very terrible sickness to catch. The more I looked into it, the more fear started to build in me. I knew that fear is wrong. Deep inside I felt like the right thing would be to close these reports and focus on something else. But I disobeyed that small voice, and I chose to keep reading about that virus anyway.

Then I strayed even further by allowing my mind to think about what I would do if I caught that virus. I thought, “Maybe I should just prepare myself for it in case I were to ever catch it.” To be ready for symptoms of queasiness, I did something that might sound strange. I gagged myself. It was a way of practicing to keep my stomach down in case I were to catch the stomach flu and not feel so good.

I felt very guilty for doing that. God had protected me for many years from being sick in my stomach. One morning as a six year old child, I became sick as a dog. I never wanted to go through that again. That same night as a little boy, I prayed fervently to God to never let me get sick to my stomach again, and God has granted that request, even to the present day that I am writing this. So I had seen God's protection before. But here, in 2012, I did not trust Him to protect me. Many feelings of condemnation went through me. There are times in the Bible when people did not trust God, and it was a terrible sin that was punished strongly. I felt like I had grieved God and He might punish me for not trusting Him to protect me from the stomach flu. Fear built up in me that maybe I was now on bad terms with God. "Does God forgive me for doing that? Does He still delight in me? Will He still be good to me?" I was increasingly becoming afraid that He wouldn't.

Then, something happened that I cannot explain: All sorts of small things out there would cause me to have a gag reflex. Going down the stairs would cause it. Bending over to get something would cause it. Sometimes even just walking would cause it. I did not want to have that reflex, but I could not help it. It was fear-based. If I feared something could affect me, then it became a trigger for that reflex. There was nothing wrong with me physically. It was all mental.

This continued for three years. It became very miserable to deal with. It could happen many times a day, or I might go a week with it happening only once. I confessed many times to God that I was wrong to gag myself and not trust His protection from the stomach flu. But I never had assurance that He forgave me. There was fear that I had sinned too far with unbelief and that maybe God didn't forgive me. The fact that this struggle was so long-lasting made me further think that God didn't forgive me.

And the struggle just continued. There were hundreds of times where that reflex was so miserable that I said inside myself, “God, kill me.” Then I always repented and said “No. Don’t kill me. Just help me.” I also did not eat much during these three years of this miserable reflex. I thought it was a bad idea to have a full stomach if I was going to be having that sensation in my throat. So I ate smaller portions. I did not know it, but eating smaller portions was affecting my weight and my health. I did not weigh myself on a scale, but I did notice that I had to make my belt tighter.

September of 2015 is when things started to become really dark. It started one day when my finger began twitching on its own. I didn’t think too much of it at first, but in the next few days, other muscles began twitching on their own. In the days following that, the twitching spread to my whole body.

Then around October of 2015 I began developing headaches. Over the coming days these headaches would become more painful. Then they began to happen more frequently. I noticed though, that they would go away after eating a meal, but only for a time. After a few hours the headache would come back strongly and I would need to eat a meal to make it leave. One day my headache was so painful it felt like someone was stabbing my head with a knife. The day after this headache, as I walked down the stairs, I noticed my legs were shaking. They had never done that before. I noticed other muscles also were shaking when I used them. Brain damage probably occurred in the massive headache the day before.

I didn’t want to see a doctor at first because I thought it might be a sign of not trusting God to heal me if I seek help from a doctor. I prayed very much during this time, but my symptoms were just getting worse. I began to get scared. “Why was God not healing? Am I even His child? Why had I not overcome the gagging struggle?”

Then a new symptom happened: I started having involuntary jerking movements. Sometimes my arm or leg would kick out on its own, without my wanting it to. Just the thought of moving my hand or foot or something could cause it to briefly move. My reflexes were also affected. They became hyperactive. One day a drop of rain unexpectedly hit my head, and my reflexes were so strong I about jumped in the air. The fear that God was angry with me kept growing day by day.

Then unfortunately, the neurological disease began affecting my sleep. Whenever I would be close to entering sleep, an involuntary jerking movement happened, and I was wide awake again. Some nights I could only get 4 hours of sleep because of it, and a few nights it prevented me from getting *any* sleep.

I became full of fear that God was angry with me. So much fear entered me that I began having nightmares. My dreams became disturbing, bizarre, and frightening. I wanted sleep, but I was also afraid of it because I knew a nightmare awaited me if I did sleep. One night I prayed a lot and had a short dream. In the dream I was reading a footnote on a page in the Bible. The footnote said "Paul wrote in his letters it is possible for a Christian to lose his salvation." Then I woke up. I was too scared to move. That footnote addressed the very fear I was dealing with. Had my unbelief when I gagged myself been so grievous to God that this footnote applies to me?

Job was a character in the Bible who went through a great physical affliction. He may have felt something similar to me:

> Job 7:13-14 — When I say, "My bed will comfort me, my couch will ease my complaint," then You scare me with dreams and terrify me with visions.

Job was not able to find comfort even in rest because his dreams were terrifying. I also could not find comfort even in rest because my dreams were terrifying.

We know the Devil was responsible for Job's calamity, and not God. But, oh, did it feel to me like the wrath of God was being poured out on me. I repeatedly prayed for healing, but it didn't happen. Many people at church also prayed for me. I absolutely believed that God heals people today, even if He heals them gradually. But as for me, the more I prayed, the worse my health and my dreams became.

I believe that if you seek God with all your heart, you will find Him. There were other times in my life where it seemed God answered when I sought Him, and I wanted Him to do something for me here. So I stopped doing any leisure activities because I didn't want to take the chance that He might disapprove of an activity, and it would get between me and God. I also felt that if I were truly desperate for God alone, then I should show it by not turning to anything else. I also wanted more time for prayer. I didn't know whether He would answer my prayers—maybe He had cut me off—but I could at least try. I confessed many times in my prayers that I shouldn't have started this whole thing when I gagged myself in my unbelief of God's protection from the stomach flu, but I didn't allow myself to have assurance that God forgave me. I also prayed much that God would heal me, but inside what I was really saying was, "God, show me You still love me by healing me. Then I will know You love me." I had not come to trust yet that God's love is infinite no matter how much we have failed Him. If God were to heal me right there, then the next time I get sick, I would panic again and question again whether God loves me. I believe this is why God delayed healing me.

I spoke with a man from church, telling him my symptoms. I couldn't sleep for the last two nights because of the twitching and jerking. I literally wasn't sure if I was going to survive this because my health had been declining for about 3 months, and God did not seem interested in answering my prayers. I told him that I believe Jesus, which was true in a sense—I did believe Jesus is the Son of God and

that He died and rose again. But secretly there was a great struggle inside me with believing that Jesus loved me and forgave me of all my sins. The man I spoke with is a good man, and he tried to encourage me by telling me to read the Bible and listen to worship. This is good advice, but he also quoted to me, Psalm 127:2 'God gives His beloved rest'. He may have meant to encourage me that God will give me rest, but it had the opposite effect. It looked from that verse that rest is a sign of being God's beloved. I couldn't get rest, and this made me feel even less like I was God's beloved.

I was studying the book of Hebrews during this time that my symptoms were bad. Hebrews has a lot to say about keeping the faith. I was unsure if I had dropped it or if I was close to doing that. From Hebrews 10:32-34 it appears that this book is addressed to persecuted Christians. Persecuted Christians are sometimes in danger of dropping the faith (Mark 4:17). One passage I read in Hebrews was,

> Hebrews 3:11-12 — "So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'" Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.

It is a quote from Psalm 95, which talks about the time when the Israelites had left Egypt and were in the wilderness. God commanded them to conquer the Promised Land, which at the time was inhabited by Canaanites and other nations. Instead of fighting and trusting God to give them the Promised Land, the Israelites were scared, and they refused to fight. God was grieved with their unbelief and sentenced them to spend 40 years in the wilderness and to die there. That word "be" in the passage means "become." In other words, I take that passage to mean "Beware, brethren, that, as there *became* an evil heart of unbelief in the Israelites, and they fell away, beware lest there *become* in you also an evil heart of unbelief that makes you also fall away." I was very afraid that maybe when God said "I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest'" that perhaps that applied to me. This punishment came on the Israelites for their unbelief, and my

troubles came on me after my own sin of unbelief, when I gagged myself after hearing about the stomach flu.

One night I was praying out loud while kneeling on my bedside. I briefly fell asleep while still praying out loud. I believe it is the only time in my life I've done that. When I was beginning to wake up a minute or two later, I found myself saying out loud the following awful words: "God, I want nothing to do with You." And I said it a second time. Then I became totally awake and realized what I said. I was disturbed by the words I spoke. Jesus said, "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." The fear in me began to rise even more. "Why did I say that? What's going on in my heart that this evil slipped out of my mouth? Am I *that* evil?"

Since my health was so bad, I finally told my small group at church about all of the past few years and the gagging, and how unbelief is a terrible sin because (so I thought) it resulted in all the gagging I've been through. I implied that my troubles were a punishment for my sin. One of them interrupted me and said, "No, God is not like that. God is a God of love and forgiveness." Unfortunately I didn't believe their message was for me. I thought my many struggles were God trying to say that He was not pleased with me or that He has decided something against me.

I eventually saw a doctor around Thanksgiving of 2015, and I weighed only 129 pounds, with clothes on. At that point I knew I was badly underweight. This probably is what caused my neurological symptoms. My body was starving and I didn't know it because I did not weigh myself. The past 10 days or so before seeing a doctor, I had been eating large amounts of food because eating a meal would take my headache away for about 3 or 4 hours, and then I would have to eat again, or else the headache would come raging back. I'm sure I had weighed even less before I started eating large portions of food 10 days before the doctor's appointment. They did an MRI on my head,

and it came back clean, though I knew from my symptoms something was going on in my brain, even if the MRI could not detect it. There are many forms of brain disease that an MRI is not able to detect, and it did not detect the disease that was occurring in my brain either.

By the beginning of January 2016, my health was so bad I began thinking more and more that I could die if it continues to get worse. When your brain goes it affects other parts of your body too, and many muscles would shake when I used them. My headaches and nightmares were still frequent also. It felt like God's wrath was being poured on me. Earlier in my life I wouldn't be afraid to die, but with everything appearing as though God had forsaken me, I was very scared of where I would go if I died. Though I prayed much to be healed, what I desperately wanted even more was to know that I was accepted with God. I would gladly have given away all my possessions if I could audibly hear God call me "son" or tell me I'm forgiven.

There was a godly lady at my church named Judy. She had a great joy of the Lord that you could see in her face. It was a real joy, and it was something I felt very far away from. After a Wednesday Bible study I told her I was going through a lot of stuff and wanted to meet with her so she could help me. She talked with her husband about it, and they agreed to have me over for dinner two days later on a Friday in January.

Then I hit my lowest point the day after asking Judy to meet with her. On top of all I was going through, a new struggle began. I developed something called intrusive thoughts. These are thoughts that repeatedly happen in your mind, but you don't want them to. In my case, I began having horrible, blasphemous thoughts in my head. They were unspeakable words against God. I was having trouble stopping them. I didn't want to think these evil things, but I kept doing it. These thoughts were so horribly evil I felt like if God had

not abandoned me already, then these thoughts would surely cause Him to do so. That's how horrible these thoughts were.

In writing my testimony, I almost didn't want to share about my struggle with intrusive thoughts of blasphemy because it is a sin that does not deserve to even be mentioned, and I also don't want them to enter your mind either. Before these thoughts started happening, I told myself, "At least I'm not in my sins." But now, even that was being challenged, because I felt overcome by these evil thoughts.

I couldn't see any hope for me. It was darkness everywhere. Normally I hold onto hope. I make sure there is some light in me, but when I had difficulty controlling these horrendous thoughts, that glimmer of hope was just about gone. I felt like I had no victory over any part of my life. There was no victory over gagging, over health, over dreams, and now, over my evil thoughts. I was very sure that the verse "They shall not enter My rest" was for me.

I met with Judy and her husband the next day (Friday), and during dinner I told them everything about the gagging, my regret over it, and the health struggles. I left out the intrusive thoughts, though. We went through some Bible passages like the one about not entering God's rest. Her husband took note that I focused on negative Scriptures and asked "Do you ever dwell on any positive Scriptures?" I was afraid God had sworn against me. So no, I didn't dwell on the positive ones because I thought if God had sworn against me, then the positive ones won't apply. I may have said something to suggest that my disease was punishment for my unbelief regarding the stomach flu. Judy said "Don't say God is putting disease on you. Stop saying that."

Judy began saying to me, "Matthew if you've repented of gagging, then God forgives you. He forgives you. He forgives you. He forgives you. Do I need to call you on the phone every day and tell you He

forgives you?" She also said, "I believe God always forgives us if we confess and repent of our sins." It was a very encouraging dinner. My sickness, nightmares, and intrusive thoughts had made me not feel like I was loved at all, but I felt loved by Judy and her husband.

Yet, as soon as I left their house, the intrusive, evil, blasphemous thoughts started happening again, and I was in great despair because of them. They happened the next day (Saturday) too, and they were very awful. Saturday night was very dark. I was so sure that I had sinned too far to be forgiven. Three times in Romans chapter 1, the Bible says that God handed them over to their sins. I felt like I was an unbeliever, and God had handed me over to my sin, like He did to them.

I called out to God Saturday night, telling Him I really, really needed Him to do something for me, more than I ever have before. It looked and felt like God had totally forsaken me: I had disturbing, frightening dreams. I prayed fervently, but my health was still horrible. I kept gagging many times a day. I couldn't stop this horrendous blasphemous thinking. I felt like it was all my fault, and I was pretty sure God had sworn against me. I said to God that I will go to church one more time. If God doesn't do something for me, then I will decide to believe that God has cut me off, and I will quit going to church.

The following are all the symptoms and fears I was going through at this time.

Symptom	**Fear**
Twitching finger	
Muscles all over my body begin to spasm	
Intense headaches	
The headaches become very frequent	
Shakiness in muscles when I use them	
Involuntary movement of arms and legs	
Hyperactive reflexes	
Miserable gagging for the last 3 years, making me wish hundreds of times I could die	
My health declines the more I and others pray	Is God's wrath being poured out on me?
Difficulty getting any sleep. I stayed awake two nights in a row	If God gives His beloved rest and I'm not resting, am I His beloved?
Very disturbing dreams even when I do sleep	If I pray to God at night and then have a nightmare, is that a sign God left me?

Great feelings of shame and condemnation for bringing all this on myself	“God sware in His wrath they will not enter His rest.” Does that verse apply to me?
I woke up praying out loud, telling God I want nothing to do with Him	If “Out of the heart a man speaks” does that mean that I don’t love God in my heart?
Very evil intrusive thoughts of blasphemy	In Romans 1, three times it says God gave them over to sin. Did He do that to me?

I brought myself to church the next morning but only barely. I had almost given up that little hope that was left in me. I thought "What good could come about if someone that God is finished with goes to church?" It is absolutely the darkest, scariest, and most dreadful place in the world to think you could be doomed, that God may have given up on you. "I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter into My rest." Sadly, I was pretty certain that verse was for me.

I was so full of fear, incredible fear. This particular Sunday morning is the only one in my life where I was literally scared of seeing Jesus. I was so sure I was under His wrath. If I had died that morning, I was expecting that I would not go to Heaven.

That Sunday morning in January, two days after speaking with Judy, I decided "Whatever the message is, I am going forward at the end to rededicate my life to God." I did not know of anything in my life that I was holding back from God. I was already trying hard to live a good, Christian life. I was cutting out any activities that I thought had even a slight chance to be displeasing to God. I allowed myself almost zero fun to try to make God "like" me, but to no avail. I continued to be sick, have evil thoughts, have nightmares, and have all the other struggles. I believe in repentance, and if by my own power I could overcome these sins and struggles, I would have done so. But I couldn't stop them. I felt like going forward for rededication was my last weapon, though I didn't even know what it was in my life that needed to be rededicated.

As I was walking into church that Sunday, a van pulled up next to me, and the man driving it said, "My wife has something to tell you. Please don't leave church until she speaks with you." I said, "Okay." I didn't know it, but this was the beginning of God moving that morning to help me. During the service, we had a 5 minute time to meet and greet each other, and I briefly spoke to the wife (named Srilakshmi) during this time. She said she had a dream of me that she

would tell me later. After the service, the pastor invited people forward who wanted to become a Christian or rededicate their life to God, or needed prayer. I went forward to dedicate my life again to God. The man whose wife had a dream for me stood behind me and I told him my thoughts have been so dark of late, and I'm having trouble stopping them. I told him other things in my life look so dark. He prayed for me, then I also received prayer from another man, and then I went to his wife to hear her dream.

When I came to Srilakshmi, she said, "I need to have Judy here to interpret the dream." I said, "Judy? I just had dinner with her two nights ago." Then it occurred to me that this was a sign of confirmation that Srilakshmi's dream was from God. No one knew I had just poured out everything to Judy two days ago, except me, Judy, her husband, and God. It would make sense for God to have Judy interpret because she knew what was going on with me. When Judy came, Srilakshmi told the dream: "I was at a beach, and there was a very long line of people. I was stamping people's papers. Matthew, you were in that line. Then finally you came to me, and I stamped your papers." Srilakshmi said, "Probably that means some good thing is going to happen to you, like you will be allowed to do something." That wasn't the end of her dream. She continued, "Then I saw a large, grand, majestic room. There were many pairs of circles coming down next to each other from the ceiling, with their edges touching each other. One would be a light circle, and the other a dark circle. The pairs of circles would land on the floor. Then a beam of light would trace a path through the circles. Sometimes the beam would trace a path through the dark circles, and sometimes the beam would trace a path through the light circles." Then she said, "Matthew, God is saying to you, Choose the light, not the dark."

I told Srilakshmi that my thoughts and my days have been very dark, and I was almost sure that it was too late for me. I cried when I was telling her this, and I hardly ever cry. Contrary to all my fears, God

had not forsaken me, nor was He condemning me, nor was He angry at me. Instead of punishing me that day as my sins and blasphemous thoughts deserved, God showed me love. Then I said, "The fact that God gave you a dream for me means that God is still speaking to me. And if He is still speaking to me, then it is not too late for me." Judy was there, and we started talking about the first part of the dream where Srilakshmi stamped my papers. Judy interpreted that part. Judy said, "God has cleared a way for you Matthew. You have to choose the light."

Judy had said to me on Friday, "God forgives you, Matthew." But I kept looking at my miserable circumstances and I was about to conclude "No, He doesn't forgive me. All this trouble is because I have sinned too far." As I said earlier, I was studying Hebrews. The first 10 chapters of Hebrews are not about practical Christian living. They are about the High Priesthood of Jesus, His once-for-all sacrifice, His atoning blood, and the need to believe these things. Inside my heart there was a struggle with whether I would believe all that Jesus accomplished for me and rejoice over it. I wanted to do that, but as I considered my terrible health and the nightmares I was getting, I believed God was trying to say something else: I thought, "My life is so horrible that it is likely that God is angry at me. Maybe He is angry because He has forsaken me. Or, maybe He is angry because there is a serious change He wants me to make in my life." In either case, I thought God was wanting me to *not* have full trust and assurance that my sins are forgiven by the blood of Jesus. Srilakshmi's word meant that I should not look at my circumstances to decide whether Jesus' blood applies to me. I should believe the blood applies to me because the Bible *tells* me to believe it applies to me.

I asked Srilakshmi how she knew that Judy was supposed to interpret the dream. She said, "I went back to bed and had a second dream where I saw myself telling you the dream with Judy next to me."

Srilakshmi had thought that stamping the papers meant I might receive clearance for something, but I believe Judy was right with her interpretation that God had cleared a way for me, which was to choose the light. Judy also said that morning, "God doesn't give up on people. It's never too late." Srilakshmi gave me a firm charge at the end of our conversation. She said, "Please don't ignore this dream. Please take this dream very seriously." I felt a sense of urgency in what she was saying. Her dream was meant to be very important to me. Another thing Srilakshmi said to me was, "If you have to choose one thousand times a day to cast down the darkness and choose the light, then that's what you do."

The intrusive thoughts stopped that morning, but I wasn't healed. Her dream at least gave me some hope that God was with me, and it gave me some direction:"Choose the light." Because of that dream, I made the decision to begin trusting in everything the book of Hebrews says Jesus accomplished through His death. Hebrews has strong warnings that I feared applied to me, but it also has great reassurance. I made up my mind to believe the passages that gave me reassurance. For example,

> Hebrews 7:24-25 — But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

I started believing that Jesus was always interceding for me and that He loved me and forgave me. I also began to worship and glorify God, but this time with a belief that I am forgiven and that God received my worship.

But it wasn't easy. Sometimes I would allow too much doubt in my mind. Then I would be flooded with tormenting thoughts that I blew it, that I disobeyed Srilakshmi's dream and chose the dark, that her dream no longer applied to me, and it was over. I had to fight hard from within to cast off all of that torment and to believe God loved

me, but with God's help, I did that. God never said that I disobeyed her dream to the point where it no longer applied, so I pressed my way through those fears and believed God's love for me.

The month after Srilakshmi shared her dream was still dark. My health was still bad, but not getting worse. I still had nightmares, but they became less frequent. The gag reflex slowly decreased, but did not go away entirely. I still didn't know whether I would live or die, but it did not matter that much now. I made my choice to believe that the blood of Christ forgave me of all my sins, and even if I die, I will go to Heaven.

After another month of pressing through the darkness and choosing to believe that God loved me, I noticed my health was also slowly improving. Then, in the four months following that, my health and other struggles continued to get better. Slowly I emerged out of that terrible pit. I had to do what Srilakshmi said, "If you have to choose one thousand times a day to cast down the darkness and choose the light, then that's what you do."

By the middle of 2016, my life had improved nearly to the point of being normal. I had earlier cut out all my leisure activities because I was afraid something might be getting between me and God, and so that I could pray longer. When it became clear that I was going to survive, I did go back to some of my hobbies for a time, maybe for two months. I could have continued with them, and life would have been fine. But I decided to cut them out of my life again. This time, though, I wouldn't *ask* God if He loved me—I would *believe* that He loved me. I also felt like I needed to know God more and that this would happen as I spent time with Him in prayer. I set aside a lot of my prayer time for worship. In light of God bringing me out of the darkest period of my life, I wanted to honor God and show Him thanks.

As I made my second attempt to diligently seek God, things turned out much better than the previous time. I slowly grew to receive God's love and worship Him for it. As I did, a great sense of peace developed and remained in my life that year. In a sense, my life was starting over. This time it was being built on the foundation of God's everlasting love. Many parts of my life began falling into place with that new foundation. 2016 began as the worst year of my life, but it ended as the best year of my life.

I don't believe God left me even during the darkest moments of that trial. I have learned God's love and forgiveness are far greater than what I had thought. I also learned how important it is to *believe* that God loves and forgives me. He was waiting for me to do that.

Relating This to the Book

Throughout my struggles mentioned above, the most fearful part of it was the thought that this verse applied to me.

> Hebrews 3:11 — "So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"

"Rest" may mean salvation there. I don't know for sure if it does, but I was afraid that it did, and that God swore against me too. I needed to stop believing that. A better verse for me to believe is,

> 1 John 1:9 — If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

Jesus will be faithful to be our High Priest in the New Covenant. He is always interceding for us, never accusing us. Judy repeatedly said to me during my dinner with her and her husband, "God forgives you." But I had doubted God's forgiveness of me during all of the three years before this, and when my circumstances became very bad, I only grew in my fear that I was not forgiven. God was wanting me in those three years to believe that He is faithful to forgive me of all

unrighteousness, including my sin of unbelief in God's protection from the stomach flu, which started this whole trial.

I also said in my testimony that I was trying hard to live a good, Christian life during my affliction. But I seemed to have no victory. Here is a list of all the things that I was doing:

- Going to church every Sunday
- Going to work five days a week
- Not watching filthy things on the internet
- Not cussing
- Not smoking
- Not drinking
- Not watching TV
- Not doing anything that could be considered entertainment
- Listening to the Bible
- Giving money
- Going to small group
- Praying much that my health improves
- Trying to believe that God will heal me

These are good things to do, and I think it would help Christians to do more of these. But there is something large that is missing from that list: I wasn't believing that Jesus loved me and forgave me of my sins. That is the most important thing to do, and I wasn't doing it. My foundation in life was wrong. Believing the love of Christ is supposed to be what causes me to do the rest of my life. But sadly, I had little faith at that time that He loved me.

Remember the foundation of the New Covenant? After Jeremiah tells all the provisions of the New Covenant he says, "For (because) I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." The provisions all hold true because God forgives our sins and remembers them no more. It's very important to have a right foundation. Before

Srilakshmi told me her dream, I had great doubt as to whether He loved and forgave me. I had made Jesus my Lord, but I didn't let my heart have any assurance that I was forgiven.

That might not seem like a big deal to many people, but it is. Our good works are never going to be enough to convince God to declare us righteous. Christ would not have to die for us if our good works could save us.

> Galatians 2:21 — "... If righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain."

We are kept under grace in the New Covenant. Grace is not just a doctrine. Grace is the way God demonstrates that He will always love us. God so loved us that He made an everlasting covenant of peace with us that will stay strong even if we sin. I do believe that sometimes sin has consequences. But I have now also come to believe that not having assurance in God's love for you can also have consequences.

Living by the New Covenant requires us to stop being self-sufficient. Instead of trying hard to be good enough, we trust Jesus and allow God to change our hearts. Prior to this whole testimony, I had been a very self-sufficient person in life. I was used to being accepted by others based on my performance. It turned me into a people-pleaser. There is nothing wrong with having talents and abilities, but I looked to those to get me through life, and I based my worth and identity in them. Through my affliction, though, everything that I was boasting in apart from Jesus dying for me, was being taken away:

- I had prided myself with my physical abilities. But that was taken away through the frequent gagging, which debilitated me.

- I had prided myself on having a great mind. But that was also taken away through the gagging, which made me feel like I had mental problems.
- I had prided myself with my good health. But that was taken away through all the neurological disease that afflicted me.
- I had prided myself with my righteous behavior. But that was taken away through the intrusive blasphemous thoughts I kept having.

I had looked to my abilities, mind, health, and good behavior to give me a sense of righteousness and of being loved. It was wrong of me to do that. God wants us to look to Christ and to the cross to see that Jesus already loved us and paid for our righteousness, but again, I wasn't doing that. All of my abilities that I thought contributed to my righteousness were taken away. I was a sick, sinful, debilitated man with mental problems. I thought there was nothing in me that God could love. Nor did it appear to me from my poor circumstances that God had any love left for me.

I was about to despair and give up all hope because of that. I had read in Hebrews about the blood, sacrifice, and high priesthood of Christ, but I wrongly decided that those didn't apply to me and that God had cut me off from being His son. I planned on making that Sunday to be the last one where I went to church unless God did something. And He did. God gave a dream to Srilakshmi to tell me "Choose the light, not the dark." Choose to believe what Hebrews says is for you. Don't listen to any thoughts that tell you God has cut you off.

All I had done for the three days before this is have evil thoughts of blasphemy in my head. That pushed me to the point of saying that I had crossed the line with God, and God could no longer love me after sinning this much. I didn't realize that grace covered my thoughts of blasphemy. God still loved, accepted, and cherished me through those three days of blasphemy. God's word to me that morning through

Srilakshmi wasn't even, "Try harder to stop your blasphemy." It was more like, "Choose to believe that I love and keep you under grace." That's when those thoughts stopped. But even if they continued, I would still choose to not be bothered by them. I would choose that God accepts me and there is nothing to fear. I didn't know even after her dream whether I would get healed, but that didn't bother me now either. I allowed myself to have assurance that my sins were forgiven, and even if I die, I go to Heaven.

I needed to go through all of this experience so that I would see for myself that God's love is infinite, and it does not depend on me being good enough. My sins, torment, and disease "spoke" to me that God had forsaken me. The blood of Christ, given by His grace, will always speak God's love and forgiveness over me. I had to choose which voice to listen to. *I took my stand on the blood of Christ.*

Since God accepts me by grace, that means I do not have to earn it. Grace is not something that can ever be earned. Believing God's grace has helped to humble me. If I am placing all trust of salvation in the cross, then I can no longer boast that I have done something to make God save me.

> Galatians 6:14 — But God forbid that I should boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

The good news of the cross of Jesus is what gives me full acceptance with God. That is so incredibly valuable that nothing else matters nearly as much. I am crucified to it all. Impressing my coworkers, meeting everyone's expectations, and fitting in with those around me used to matter a lot because that is where I looked to meet my need of feeling important, valued, and accepted. But now, I see myself as the beloved of Christ.

> Song of Songs 7:10 — I am my beloved's, and his desire is toward me.

My sense of importance is found in that I belong to my Lord. He bought me. He is my Master. He gets to tell me what to do. And, He loves me. He cherishes me. The Master accepts me by His grace. That is really all that matters.

> 2 Samuel 23:5 KJV — … Yet He hath made with me an everlasting covenant, ordered in all things, and sure: for this is all my salvation, and all my desire…

Will you let Jesus' love and acceptance be the only thing that matters to you? Remember the parable of the four types of soil. The seed that grew up with thorns was choked by the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the pleasures of life. But those things did not matter to the seed planted on good soil. The seed on good soil understood the gospel for the treasure that it really is. That seed took care to not let anything get in the way of knowing and loving Jesus. They were the ones that produced much fruit.

I have come to believe that if God can love me after I committed so much blasphemy in my head, then there is nothing I can do to ever make Him stop loving me. I have learned through my story and others' stories that God loves us even when we are at our worst. These stories have taught me that I should never think that anyone has sinned so much that God stopped loving them. Yes, they may need to repent of some things to become right with God, but in God's infinite love, He is *always* willing to forgive anyone that repents of their sin and believes Jesus. It is never hopeless for anyone.

Before Srilakshmi shared her dream with me, I tried to let go of every leisure activity in case there was something displeasing to God. Much of this book encourages you to die to the things of the world. It is good for there to be a desire to surrender everything to God. But there is a right motive and a wrong motive to do that.

> Philippians 3:8-9 — Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for

> whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ…

I was trying to surrender all things and count them all as loss, just like Paul was doing above. But there is a large difference between why Paul surrendered all things and why I surrendered all things. When Paul speaks about surrendering all things, it was, "for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ." He was not trying to earn favor or forgiveness with God. He even says, "Not having my own righteousness, which is through the law, but that which is through faith in Christ." Unfortunately, I *was* trying to obtain some sort of merit or righteousness from God by surrendering everything. My surrender wasn't done from faith that Christ has already made me righteous by the cross. It was an attempt to earn righteousness. My sickness and torment only grew worse as I did that.

But after Srilakshmi shared her dream with me, I learned to place my full assurance of salvation not in my works, but in the cross of Christ. I was no longer being self righteous. Then a few months after her dream, I made another effort to die to the things of the world, not to boast about it, but to know Him more and to have more time to worship Him. I began again to devote many hours a week to prayer and worship.

It turned out different this time. Instead of my life becoming worse, it became better. Great peace came into my life. There was a revelation of Christ's love that I had not known before. The Bible says the love of Christ "passes knowledge" (Eph 3:19). You cannot know it with your head. The Holy Spirit pours out the love of God, not in your head, but in your heart (Rom 5:5). Sometimes I would even wake up with a worship song in my head—a large difference from the frequent nightmares I had during my affliction. It felt like my spirit was refreshed. That is what spending time with the Lord will do. "For they

all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them." I believe my spirit was growing in knowing the Lord. I wasn't the same afterward. Sin seemed to drop off of me. Thoughts or attitudes of sin just weren't as appealing as before. As I spent much time abiding in Him and knowing Him, I did not want to sin.

> 1 John 3:6 — Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him.

I didn't know it at the time, but I was walking in the provisions of the New Covenant:

- I was trusting that Jesus loved me and that He alone was my righteousness.
- I was cutting activities out of my life so that I could love and worship Him alone.
- I took my thoughts captive to Jesus so that the flesh was not allowed to reign.
- I was opening my heart to him in prayer, thus knowing Him and having fellowship with Him.

No one had to teach me to have love, joy, peace, patience, and the other fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23). The Spirit was producing those virtues in my life. It wasn't me who changed anything. I was only being faithful to trust the everlasting love of Christ and to worship Him back. The Holy Spirit was the One who was bearing fruit in me. That is a great benefit of the New Covenant. The Holy Spirit will do the work in us. It is all the work of God.

I don't want to give the impression that my life has been a nice bed of roses ever since 2016. It hasn't. I still find myself walking in flesh and effort, instead of faith and the Holy Spirit, more often than I would like. But still, I learned important truth that year that transformed me. Sometimes we think trying harder will set us free. But often, when the light of *truth* comes into our lives and we act on it, that is when we shall be made free.

John 8:32 — "... You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

May the truth of this book and of this testimony make you free.

My testimony has given me a new life verse that I call to memory often. If I am confused about Christianity or of what God expects from me, I go to this verse. We have seen it before.

Galatians 2:20 — "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me."

- "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live." The Old Covenant was a failure. Our lives are too difficult to be "managed." We don't run our lives. We crucify them, including our sins, our efforts, and everything else.
- "but Christ lives in me." That is the New Covenant way to defeat sin. We should be so given to Jesus, knowing Him, loving Him, and walking with Him, that it is now Jesus who runs our lives.
- "and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." The most important step. You must believe that no matter how bad your sins are, Jesus loved you and died for you. It is the best news you could receive. Will you place all hope of salvation in Christ's death for you? Will you love Him back and let Him be Lord of all your life?

About the Author

Matthew graduated with a Bachelors of Science in Mathematics from The Ohio State University. Then he did computer programming and database work for seven years. He loves to study the Bible. He has read through it many times. He pours this knowledge into people who are willing to listen or who feel for some reason like God has forsaken them. He was certainly in that place himself, but God helped him to overcome. His email address is endres@disciples.com.